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T W Saxton

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ALL FOR GREED.





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"A well-born woman can always do what is her duty."

# ALL FOR GREED.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON :  
VIRTUE AND CO., 26, IVY LANE ;  
NEW YORK : VIRTUE AND YORSTON.  
1868.

LONDON:  
PRINTED BY VIRTUE AND CO.,  
CITY ROAD.

MRS. GEORGE G. GLYN,

IN MEMORY

OF GOOD WORK DONE,

WITH THOSE

WHO BEAR HER NAME,

AND

AS AN UNWORTHY TRIBUTE

OF

THE DEEPEST REGARD AND ESTEEM,

*This Book*

IS INSCRIBED BY

THE AUTHOR,

A. A. A.



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# ALL FOR GREED.

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## CHAPTER I.

### A VERY SMALL TOWN.

IN the whole west of France there is no prettier town than D——. Lying rather out of the way, it has as yet had but few pretexts for “improving” itself, and in many respects presents the same appearance as it did some half a century ago. D—— is nothing in particular ; not a fishing town, for the sea is too far off ; nor a manufacturing town, for “business” of that kind is ab-

serbed by Chôlet, which is some ten leagues distant, and represents the manufacturing interest. D—— is, if anything, an occasional place of passage or rest for drovers, who still find it quickest and cheapest to drive their Chôletais oxen from the banks of the Lèvres to the more central towns on the banks of the Loire, pending the establishment of small local railway branches. No railroad leads to D——. If it did, old Martin Prévost would not have been the great ruler of that small town that he truly was.

Martin Prévost was of Swiss extraction. His grandfather had been valet de chambre, steward, factotum, alter ego, to a famous Vendéan chief,—a proud rich noble of the ancient régime, but one of the few who preferred the hard active life of a partisan to

anything Court favour could offer him, and who was genuinely glad to exchange Versailles for the hazards and hardships of La Chouannerie. The trading principle being uppermost in the mind of the Helvetian, the confidant of Monsieur le Marquis soon became rich. It was said that he managed to sell a good many of the necessities of existence to both sides at once, and that both were his grateful customers. He was never known to betray either, but merely got out of each all he could. Monsieur le Marquis died in exile, earning starvation wages by the French lessons he gave in an English seaport town, and his valet de chambre died possessed of a house in D——, in which he had, at the time of the Consulate, opened what Americans would call a “store.” His principle was one of

beautiful simplicity. He bought everything and sold everything ; striving only with delightful single-mindedness never to realise any profit under twenty per cent. upon either operation. He married a wife who was crooked and blind of one eye, but these slight defects were fully compensated for to him by the dower she brought him, and which he laid out so as to double it,—of which fact she never had the smallest token or proof.

His son was unworthy of his sire, and did nothing to improve his position in life. The father judged his offspring severely, but took care to get him advantageously married, and when he died, recommended him to the care of his wife.

Prévost II. went through life and out of it, unnoticed ; but did not dissipate his estate,

so that, at his death, in 1835, he left what his father had left him, and what his wife's dot had added to that, untouched and entire to his two sons.

In Martin Prévost, the younger of these two sons, the spirit of the grandfather burned strongly, and was intensified by that atmosphere of barter which in France above all countries, is the very "over-soul" of mankind in this nineteenth century. Martin Prévost carried the destinies of his house to a remarkable height, and at the time of which we are writing he was virtually the ruler of D—— and its population of 3,800 souls.

Martin Prévost was the money-lender of the whole district, and as those who borrowed rarely paid in cash, and as he never lent save on unexceptional security, it is not

difficult to calculate how from decade to decade Martin's power and wealth increased. Soon after his father's death he bought a Charge de Notaire, which he kept for six or seven years, and then sold to considerable advantage; for he had gained for this office such repute that people of high standing came to consult him, from distant towns even, and his opinion and advice were worth gold! When Monsieur Martin Prévost sold his Étude he called this proceeding retiring from business. "Je me retire des affaires," said he; but there were one or two sharp-eyed individuals, and D—— numbered marvellously few such, who opined that on the contrary this was the very period when Prévost's business seriously began. By the time he had been six or seven years a notary, no family within twenty or thirty miles had

a secret of which he was unpossessed ; and when he delivered over the various and voluminous documents of his office to his unsuspecting successor, he carried away in his prodigious memory the details of the financial complications of the entire neighbourhood. But old Prévost was a wise man, and though his power was felt and acknowledged, he never allowed it to be supposed that he ever could possibly presume upon it. He lived well, but modestly and economically, having but one servant, a woman for whom he had the deepest respect, and as outdoor servant, a man who was gardener, labourer, groom, and commissionnaire to Madame Jean.

It used to be said in and about D—— that no one knew anything that was not good, and that no one felt anything that

was, touching Martin Prévost; yet every one applied to him, and every one, at some moment or other of their lives, trusted him. He had never married, but he had adopted his nephew, and given the young fellow an excellent education. Old Martin's brother had turned out ill,—that is, unlucky,—and had died young in America, whither he had emigrated, terribly in debt. What became of his wife, or who or what she was, no one in D—— ever heard. Some people said she had run away from him; but Martin had the boy sent to him, when he was only six years old, had brought him up since then, and, I repeat it, had brought him up well. What created no little astonishment was, that he had not brought him up over strictly, but in the way of liberty and money gave him to the

full as much as other young men of his station could boast of possessing.

Wednesday was market day in D——, and on a certain Wednesday, not quite two years ago, a little group of two or three women was gathered round the open door of Martin Prévost's house talking with Madame Jean. There was the same character of sharpness in each of those female faces, but Madame Jean had an air of authority which the others lacked, and the basket she carried on her strong stout arm was half as big and half as full again as any of the other women's baskets. It was not much past eight o'clock, and though the October sun was warm, the air was still cool, and a fresh but not unpleasant wind shook the boughs of the lime-trees overhanging the terrace of old Prévost's garden.

“Certainly poultry is out of all price,” cried bitterly a skinny, black-browed woman, looking enviously at Madame Jean, and at a pair of huge Cochin-Chinese legs that protruded from her basket. “We up at the Mairie haven’t gone out of beef and vegetables for I don’t know how long ;—and beef, up now at thirteen sous, one franc six a kilo, as they will call it ;—well ! I reckon by pounds and sous, I can’t take to their new ways, though I do belong to the Administration.” At this the speaker drew herself up with pride.

“Yes,” said Madame Jean, “beef is dear, and veal is bad,—all strings ;—and poultry is dear, and everything is dear.”

“But nothing is too dear for la maison Prévost,” interrupted the purveyor of Monsieur le Maire. “Mère Jubine well knows

where she can place a fowl even for the sum of three francs ten,—four francs even, who can tell ? ”

“ Mère Jubine owed it me ! ” replied, with dictatorial tone, Madame Jean. “ The last I bought from her was an unsatisfactory fowl, so I reckoned it her at only half price, and took this one to make up. Our young man is not well just now, and wants light food, so I shall let him eat poultry for a few days. Bless my soul ! it ain’t such an extra after all. With two pots au feu there’s the whole week ; reckon :—all depends on the management, no extras are any matter if you are a ménagère, and if you are not, why you come to think bread itself an extra ; but where are the ménagères ? ” Madame Jean said this defiantly, and the other matrons were cowed.

“Is anything serious the matter with Monsieur Richard?” asked the mildest looking of the group in a propitiatory manner.

“Serious? No!” responded Madame Jean, as though it would have been absurd to suppose that anything serious could be the matter in so prosperous a house as that of Monsieur Prévost. “Serious? No! but you know he never was the strongest of the strong; he’s not a Turk nor a weight-thrower at the fair, and he’s never quite got over his attack of the lungs this winter; he’s delicate, if you will, but care makes up for everything, and he gets lots of it.”

“Why didn’t you buy that hare of Mère Lucas?” whined out the chief of the mayor’s kitchen. “I’ve heard say game was good for invalids.”

“Because I didn’t choose,” retorted Madame Jean sharply.

“Oh!” was the rejoinder. “Faites excuse. I thought it might be because of something else,” and the woman looked warlike. But war with Madame Jean was not a thing to be dreamt of, as she quickly showed. Turning sharply round, and resting the whole of her outspread hand upon one end of her big basket, which drove the other end of that well-filled recipient so far up behind her shoulder that the Cochin-Chinese legs seemed almost sprouting from her back like cherubs’ wings—“Madelon,” said she, “you mean Prosper Morel. I know quite well what you mean; but we know all about it as well as you do, and we don’t want Monsieur le Maire or anybody else to inform us of

anything. I had my thoughts about that hare, if you must know ; that hare never was shot,—that hare was caught, caught mayhap on Monsieur Rivière's land, therefore stolen. There ; call it by its name, stolen ; a deal more likely stolen by Prosper Morel than by any one else ; but what then ? primo, where's the proof ? You believe it ; the Maire believes it ; the garde's certain sure of it ; but more than all, I believe it ; but what then ? Prosper has had his permit taken from him ; Monsieur wouldn't help him to get it ; and what then ? Suppose the garde catches him, and draws up his *procès-verbal*, and he gets condemned and fined, and justice is satisfied, and suppose Monsieur turns him out of his hut up there in the forest, and gets another woodcutter. Well, suppose all that, what

then? Who'll be shot in a by-path, or have his throat cut in his back shop, or have his house burnt over his head?" The women all looked aghast and nodded their heads ominously, as though admitting that it was but too true.

"You fancy, do you," continued Madame Jean, "that that silent, sulky, hulking Breton would let the worst come to the worst without having his revenge. But all the same, Madelon: don't you imagine we don't know as well as Monsieur le Maire what goes on in D——; only I don't buy trapped game. Monsieur Richard's chasse suffices us. We are regular people, and eat the hares and partridges off our own stubble. If Mère Lucas makes one franc fifty clear profit out of a hare, she pays fifty centimes, taking the risk. She's welcome to it, but I

don't put the one franc fifty into her pocket, not I ! ”

“ Monsieur le Curé's Lise does,” observed the mild-mannered woman.

“ Oh ! Monsieur le Curé's Lise ! ” snarled Madelon in her most contemptuous tone, and as though no proceeding could possibly be too objectionable for Monsieur le Curé's Lise.

“ Well ! Monsieur le Curé's Lise ? ” retorted Madame Jean. “ She's a wise woman ; she gets for two francs a hare worth four, not to say five, if we were in carnival time, and no harm done. Monsieur le Curé may do what he likes.”

“ There she goes across the street,” remarked Madelon.

“ And Céleste from down at Vêrancour's, with her,” added her soft spoken companion.

A laugh, indulged in together, by Madame Jean and Madelon, seemed to establish peace between them.

“It would be a fine sight to see what she has bought at market,” sneered Madelon; “two potatoes, three olives, and an onion, maybe! They do say that on fast days Céleste serves up fish a week old!”

“Fish!” echoed Madame Jean; “fish out of sea or river comes a deal too dear for the Château!” She laid a tremendously pompous accent on the first syllable. “I was once inside their doors, and in going away I had just to cross the dining-room as they were coming in to dinner. If you’ll believe me, there was, besides a soup of bread and water, nothing but lentils and a red herring. But, Lord! weren’t they set out in fine silver dishes! It was the

Wednesday of the quatre-temps de Septembre. I've wondered to myself ever since then what it is they live upon ; for the wind that blows, however healthy it may be, won't keep body and soul together in three grown-up people."

"Live upon?" exclaimed almost savagely Madelon. "Why, upon their own importance!"

"To be sure," remarked the conciliatory one of the group, "they do believe in themselves!"

"Yes," muttered Madame Jean, "to make up for nobody else's believing in them."

"Never mind," added Madelon, "let's see what Céleste has got in the way of flesh for these grandees, for it's not the quatre-temps de Septembre now, and they

must put something more than vanity into their stomachs, all the same. (‘é——”

“Hush !” said Madame Jean, stopping the loud appeal which the other woman was preparing to address to the two bonnes who were at the further side of the street.

“Hush ! There’s Monsieur le Vicomte himself turning the corner down to the left, and coming this way.”

“Ugh !” grunted Madelon. “What’s he wanting up hereabouts ? I thought his daily mass was hardly over by this time.”

“He’s coming here,” said Madame Jean ; and a moment later the person alluded to came up from behind, divided the group of women, touching his hat as he passed, and saying “Pardon, mesdames !” confronted Madame Jean on the doorsteps on which she was standing. The women nodded to each

other and parted, leaving Madame Jean alone on the threshold of the maison Prévost.

“Could I see Monsieur Prévost for a moment?” inquired the new comer, politely.

“Quite impossible at this hour,” rejoined Madame Jean after a most stately fashion. “Monsieur has not yet breakfasted. It is not yet nine. Monsieur breakfasts as the clock strikes ten, and Monsieur never sees any one before breakfast. You have not come by appointment?” she asked.

“No—not exactly—but——”

“Of course not,” interrupted Madame Jean. “Monsieur would have informed me.”

“But my business is very pressing,” urged the petitioner, “and would not take up more than a quarter of an hour.”

But it was no use. Madame Jean was

“in the exercise of her functions,” and any one who has ever had dealings with them, knows in that particular state how unmanageable is a Frenchman or a Frenchwoman. Madame Jean was not impolite; she was impervious, opaque, not to be penetrated by an influence from without. He who strove to propitiate her, had to bear his ill-success complacently,—for fear of worse,—and accept her permission to come again at eleven o’clock. She had the satisfaction of making things go her own way without any extraordinary effort; and though it could not be objected that she was rude, she contrived never once to address her interlocutor as “Monsieur le Vicomte.”

## CHAPTER II.

### THE MARRIAGE PORTION.

MADAME JEAN had barely witnessed the retreat of her enemy, for such it appeared he was, however innocently, when she became aware that her master was calling her from within. She shut the house-door, and, putting down her basket in the passage, went up-stairs to a room on the first-floor, whence the voice issued. Opening a door to the right, she stood in Monsieur Prévost's presence.

He was standing close to a large table

covered with account books and papers, and he held an open letter in his hand.

Martin Prévost was about sixty-two or three, and though he looked strong and bien conservé, still he looked his age. He was above the middle height, gaunt rather than spare, with a bony frame, an immense hook-nose, and two small, sharp eyes, quite close together. There were about him all the signs of power of an inferior order; power of plodding, power of endurance, and capacity of privation, and the unfailing marks of acquisitiveness,—the rapacious eye and hand. “Look at that,” he said, in an angry tone, as he thrust into Madame Jean’s fingers the open letter he held in his own; “the fellow has just been here, and I have told him that if he can’t clear himself of these accusations

he must go. I wash my hands of him. I'll have no quarrels with the Administration. He shall be turned out."

Meanwhile Madame Jean read the letter, which ran thus:—

"SIR AND HONOURED COLLEAGUE" (Monsieur Prévost had been the mayor of D—— three years before, and the present man was his successor),—"I think it right to warn you of the irregularities of the man named Prosper Morel, in your employ. As you are aware, he has no permis de chasse this season, but I have every reason to believe he steals game in the night-time. The garde, François Lejeune, is morally convinced of having seen this individual committing his malpractices, though he has hitherto contrived to escape being taken

in flagrante delicto; and Monsieur Rivière has already twice complained of him to me officially. As the man is employed by you, and as nothing would give me greater pain, sir and honoured colleague, than to have to take any steps annoying to you, I venture to beg that you will admonish him and force him to renounce his malpractices, in default of which I should be obliged to proceed with a rigour I should deeply deplore, and set the gendarmerie in action.

“I remain, &c.,

“SIMON COLLOT, *Major.*”

When Madame Jean reached the word gendarmerie, she for certain excellent reasons which we shall know later, curled her lip in disdain, and muttered something

unintelligible, but which seemed to imply that she knew better than to indulge in the slightest alarm respecting the gallant body of defenders of the state.

“Now look you here, Sophie,” said Monsieur Prévost, when his prime-minister had concluded her perusal of the administrative appeal, “my mind is made up. Prosper Morel goes about his business at the end of the month. I’ll have nobody of his kind about me; it compromises one’s position. It’s intolerable; he shall leave at the end of the month.”

Madame Jean shook her head. “He’s been here sixteen years,” objected she.

“What does that matter?” retorted her master.

“His wife was the little one’s *bonne*.”

“That has nothing to do with it.”

“No ;—I know it hasn’t,” observed the woman, “nothing at all ;—only she saved his life when he had the typhus fever, and lost her own by catching it.”

“What the devil has that in common with her husband ?” growled Martin Prévost. “The woman’s dead.”

“Yes ; but how is the man to gain his bread if he leaves here ?” persisted Madame Jean. “He’s at home a long way off, down in Basse Bretagne, and he’s got no home at all when he gets there.”

“He must beg,” replied Martin Prévost.

“Begging’s forbidden by law,” answered Madame Jean. “He must steal or he must starve.”

“Well, he must go, that’s certain,” rejoined her master.

Madame Jean fixed a hard, bold look on

old Martin Prévost, and though the look was both bold and hard, it was a far better one than that which shot from his keen ferret eyes, and he quailed before it.

“Prosper Morel is a dangerous man,” said she authoritatively.

“Bah !” grumbled Monsieur Prévost ;  
“a man without a sou is never dangerous.”

“You mistake,” replied Madame Jean,  
“a man with ever so little money is not dangerous, but a man with none at all is ;  
and I tell you, beware of Prosper Morel ;  
don’t cast him off, give him another chance.”  
In everything Madame Jean seemed used to have her own way. She apparently ruled and governed, and when she retired from her master’s presence, it was settled that Prosper Morel should be severely lectured

by both Monsieur Prévost and herself, but that he should retain his office of bûcheron, and the abode it secured to him in the forest, on condition of good behaviour in future.

While this discussion was going on upstairs, another little scene, in immediate connection with it, was being enacted on the ground-floor. The window of a room at the back of the house, looking over a paved court, and beyond that to the garden, was open, and seated at it was a young man, in a well-padded arm-chair, listlessly and lazily smoking a cigar. A shadow fell across him, projected by the figure of a man who passed in front of the open window, and touched his cap as he did so.

“Good day, Prosper,” said the young man in an indolent tone of voice.

“Salut, Monsieur Richard,” mumbled the other, and went his way.

“Prosper,” called the young man, “when will you bring me down those rods? The weather isn’t at all bad for fishing, but my rods are all too short.”

The man turned round, came back, and stood right in front of the window. He was decidedly disagreeable to look at, slouching, ungainly, clumsily put together. You could not help comparing him to those unfinished animals which are shown to us as nature’s first efforts before the flood. He did not look bad, but unpleasant,—an incomplete product, with the mud and slime of that jelly period sticking to his features and limbs.

“I can’t bring you the rods, Monsieur Richard,” said he, in a thick, drawling voice,

“for I am going away,—going for ever. Monsieur up there”—and he gave a jerk with his thumb in the direction of the first-floor—“has turned me away.”

“What for?” inquired Monsieur Richard.

The man scratched his head, and looked more hopelessly stupid than before. “Oh, *histoire de rien !*” he drawled out ; “*histoire de Monsieur le Maire.*”

“Nonsense, Prosper,” argued the young man, laying his cigar on the window-sill ; “you can’t go.”

“I am going, Monsieur Richard,” he rejoined ; “but——” and everything in him seemed, as it were, to set at that moment ; lips, eyebrows, and hands, stiffened into an expression of brutish revengefulness that was still more stupid than threatening. Decidedly the ruling characteristic of the

man was blockheadedness. I can find no other term.

“Nonsense, Prosper; hold your tongue!” rejoined Monsieur Richard. “Come round here into my room and tell me all about it. I must set you right with my uncle.”

The man did as he was bid, and slouchingly skulked off to the back entrance. And certainly Monsieur Richard did look a likely person to make peace between people. He was so very blond and gentle-looking; not strong, decidedly, as Madame Jean had stated of him, but with an air of good-nature and delicate health that made you pity him and account for the evident laziness—it was more than indolence—of his nature.

As eleven o’clock was striking Monsieur le Vicomte came, and claimed the audience

that had been promised him by Madame Jean, who was graciously pleased herself to introduce him into the same room on the first-floor in which we have already been made acquainted with the master of the house.

This room was Martin Prévost's sanctuary. In it were assembled the several objects of his dearest care,—his correspondence, his account-books, and his safe. That same *caisse de sûreté* was about the only indication that Monsieur Prévost had ever allowed himself to afford to the outer world of his riches; and, naturally, legends had taken it for their basis in the little world of D——. It had come all the way from Paris, and fabulous sums were mentioned as its price. This infinitely annoyed Martin Prévost, and if he could have kept his wealth

securely in his cellar, he would have done so gladly. Of course his natural instinct, as is that of his entire class, was to bury it, to hide it, but education and the age having left their impress on him, he resisted this impulse; and, sure enough, there in that safe were all Martin Prévost's securities, bonds, shares, obligations,—and cash.

Well; his visitor entered, and sat down, and having something really important to say, began—as in that case people invariably do—by speaking of something utterly unimportant, and irrelevant to the matter in hand.

There they were, face to face; the grandson of the Swiss valet de chambre and the “son of the crusaders;” and, *ma foi!* if the truth must be told, there was very little to choose between them as to mere external

aspect. Monsieur de Vérancour was not by any means aristocratic looking; not a bit of a François Premier, or a Maréchal de Richelieu, or a Lauzun, or any other type of the fiery grace and brilliant corruption of the past;—not an atom about him of the pale, tall, worn-out, exquisite old gentleman whom romanciers, as a rule, oppose to bull-headed blown-out Loursiers, as the true representatives of an era you would fancy they deplored;—not a sign of all this in Monsieur le Vicomte. He was rather of the bull-headed type himself, and instead of having an aquiline nose, which, to be truthful, Martin Prévost had, his nose was a thick, stumpy nose; the black hairs which encircled his bald crown were bristles; his face was broad, and its colouring red-brown; his figure was stout and not very tall; and

his hands were ugly, and the nails not clean. His dress was slovenly, and he looked like a man who used his limbs a good deal, and lived much in the open air in all weathers. His age was not much past fifty.

Between these two men, one made and the other marred by '89, was there then any difference at all? More than you suppose, but quite other than you think. For the present, we will go no further than mere manner. As they sat there opposite to each other, Martin Prévost seemed to have in many respects the advantage of the two, but he lacked one thing which the Vicomte had, and that one thing was ease.

After having exhausted the subject of pears;—old Prévost was a pear fancier, and the orchard at the Château was supposed to possess some wonderfully fine specimens of

almost extinct sorts ;—Monsieur de V éran-cour suddenly plunged into the subject for which he had so impatiently sought the present interview.

“ You are curious to know the business which brings me to you to-day ? ” said he with a smile. Old Prévost bowed stiffly, as though he wished to mark that he was not curious at all. “ Well, I have a great secret to tell you, and I rely entirely on your discretion, for such things must not be talked about. I am going to marry my eldest daughter——”

“ To Monsieur de Champmorin,” interrupted old Prévost in a freezing tone.

The Vicomte was very near giving a visible start, but did not do so.

“ You really are a magician ! ” exclaimed he with a laugh, “ but all the same I count

on your discretion; these things must not be talked about till they are absolutely settled."

"And this is not absolutely settled," added old Prévost, half interrogatively, and fixing his two small keen eyes on his visitor.

"Well,—a marriage is only settled when the bridal mass is chanted," replied the Vicomte, evasively.

"Monsieur de Champmorin has thirty thousand francs a year now," continued Martin Prévost, not unloosing his piercing gaze from his hearer's countenance. "He will have at his uncle's death a house in Paris, in the neighbourhood of the General Post Office, that will give him fifteen thousand francs more, because that he will divide with his sister; the uncle leaves to

both alike ; but he will have his grand-aunt's property all to himself at her death ;—she's near eighty now ;—and Saulnois, if it was only decently attended to, ought to yield five-and-twenty thousand francs a year net. So you see thirty and fifteen are forty-five ; and say only twenty,—because of course he'll farm Saulnois ill !—that makes sixty-five thousand francs a year, first and last. Monsieur de Champmorin is out and out the best parti in the department. Have you any objection to make to him ? ” Martin Prévost asked this question, fixing his eyes still more like screws into the features of the Vicomte's face ; and then, before giving him time to answer, “ I know it has been said he drinks, and is violent, and ill brought up, and lives only with his farm servants,” he went on ; —“ but that would hardly be objected to.

Mademoiselle Félicie is very clever, and so saintly a person that she would perhaps win him into better conduct;—and then, in your society man and wife have so little need to be together! If les convenances are satisfied, that is the essential point,—the rest is only of consequence in our class, in little humble households;—but do tell me; you surely have no objections to make to Monsieur de Champmorin?”

No! the truth had to come out, whole and entire. Monsieur de Vérancour had no objection whatever to make to Monsieur de Champmorin; but Monsieur de Champmorin made one small requirement of him,—namely, that that most accomplished and most saintly person, Mademoiselle Félicie, should have a dot of some sort or kind. It had to come out, and it did come out, drawn

bit by bit, but wholly and to the last morsel, by the pressure of Martin Prévost's able and pitiless hand.

“So you would mortgage Les Grandes Bruyères; would you?” he abruptly asked when he knew all he wanted to know. “Well, Monsieur le Vicomte, you are best able to say what income that valuable property yields you;” and Monsieur Prévost commented upon these words with a smile imperceptibly ironical.

“Les Grandes Bruyères was the most valuable portion of my great-grandfather's whole estate in this part of the country,” replied quietly Monsieur de Vérancour.

“Was,—yes, granted; but what is it now? What does it yield you?”

“Oh, me? That is altogether another thing. I am too poor to farm such a

property as it ought to be farmed; but you know what the land at Les Grandes Bruyères is worth, my dear Monsieur Prévost;" and in his turn the Vicomte fixed his eyes upon his interlocutor in a way that the latter did not find agreeable. The real truth of the matter was this: the bridegroom-elect of Mademoiselle Félicie had, after much discussion with his notary, and as much more between this functionary and the future father-in-law, agreed to limit his prétentions to the sum of sixty thousand francs, moyennant quoi, he was content to take Mademoiselle Félicie "for better, for worse." It was a miserably small sum,—not three thousand pounds of English money,—and any one might see how, with his "hopes and expectations" and thirty thousand francs a year in hand, Monsieur de

Champmorin was letting himself go dirt-cheap at such a price. It was a splendid "placement" for Mademoiselle Félicie; every atom of advantage was on her side. Words failed wherewith to paint the generous disinterestedness of Monsieur de Champmorin; but then, as his notary remarked, this was a "love match." Such was the excuse urged, when this bridegroom, in such high financial condition, consented to be purchased for the paltry sum of sixty thousand francs! And the public were expected to adopt his view of the transaction, and call it a "mariage d'amour!" But unluckily Monsieur de Vérancour had not the sixty thousand francs to give! Do what he would, he could not scrape them together. This, however, led merely to prolonged discussion and to the ac-

ceptance of another form of payment by the Champmorin notary. Instead of the capital paid down, M. de Vérancour was to pay the annual interest upon it to his daughter, who was to receive three thousand francs a year, £120, paid quarterly,—£30 every three months! Well, it was a cheap price for a husband, if you come to think of it! But now came the difficulty; how to raise the money!—Martin Prévost! There was the solution! And so Monsieur le Vicomte came to Martin Prévost, and had to tell him all, and leave not one little corner of his domestic embarrassments, however humiliating they might be, unrevealed. It had to be done, or all chance of placing Mademoiselle Félicie was at an end. At the end of half an hour, then, Martin Prévost held the destinies of the Vérancour family in his hands.

The point at issue was this:—the property of Les Grandes Bruyères was worth one hundred and fifty thousand francs any day to a man less poor than the Vicomte;—worth that to be sold, and worth that for the income it would yield to any one capable of farming it properly. But to M. de Vêran-cour it was worth nothing, or worse than nothing; and his was the position of so many thousand needy landholders in France, to whom their land is a dead weight instead of a source of gain.

The long and the short of it was, that Martin Prévost, refusing inflexibly to lend one farthing upon any security whatever, and all idea of a mortgage being at an end, condescended at last to promise to purchase Les Grandes Bruyères for the sum of seventy thousand francs, the “odd ten”

being destined to the trousseau and inevitable marriage expenses. But how they had haggled, before they got to this conclusion, they alone can understand who have had the misfortune to be mixed up in France with "marrying and giving in marriage."

"But why not at once give Mademoiselle Félicie her dot of sixty thousand francs, since I buy Les Grandes Bruyères, and you get the money?" inquired old Prévost.

"Because with half the sum I can quintuple it in a year," replied the Vicomte sagaciously.

"Ah!" drawled out old Prévost; "you can quintuple it, can you? Well, I wish I knew that secret! But you gentlefolks have a vivacity of intelligence that is surprising sometimes to us mere plodders and hard-working bourgeois."

“I must not tell you yet,” resumed Monsieur de Vérancour, with an air of diplomatic importance, “but there is an affair about to be launched that will make millionnaires of all those who are connected with it; I have friends at the head of it, and—” he stopped suddenly, as though on the brink of violating some awful secret; “and when the time comes,” he resumed, “I will try to interest you in it too.”

“Serviteur;” answered old Prévost, with a profound bow. “I am infinitely obliged.”

Just as Monsieur de Vérancour got up to go, the money-lender spoke again. “There seems to me to be one little difficulty about your arrangements, Monsieur le Vicomte,” murmured Martin Prévost blandly; “you will pay to Madame de Champmorin the yearly sum of three thou-

sand francs, but when you come to marry Mademoiselle Geneviève you will have to do precisely the same thing. She can force you to do it by law. What will you dispose of then? I may be dead by that time, and you may perhaps not find any one so anxious to do you a service." He called the operation he had just been engaged upon by this name!

Monsieur de Vêrancour turned round, and with a broad frank smile, "Vévette!" echoed he; "oh! Vévette will never marry. Vévette will go into a convent at her majority. It will be impossible to prevent her; and if she should change her mind, why, I shall by that time be able to give her such a dot as will enable her to marry a duke and a peer."

"Well, by that time I shall probably be

dead," again repeated old Prévost, following his visitor to the door of the room; "but don't forget Mademoiselle Vévette. She is a very charming young lady, and the law will force you to give precisely the same advantages to the two sisters."

When Monsieur le Vicomte de Vérancour was in the street, and trudging home as fast as he could, in order to write by post time to the Champmorin notary that all was made smooth now for the "placing" of his daughter Félicie in her most romantic "love match," he never once asked himself what impelled old Martin Prévost to take such a lively interest in the destiny of his daughter Vévette.

## CHAPTER III.

### THE SISTERS.

THE Château, as it was termed, more often derisively than otherwise, had really once upon a time been the seignorial residence of D——, but the ancestors of the Véraucour family were not its possessors then. It had come to them by marriage. Somewhere about the end of the sixteenth century a daughter of the house of Beauvoisin, the chief of which was the then châtelain and lord of D——, had been given in marriage by Henry IV. to the son of a recently ennobled échevin of Angers, whose riches,

acquired no one precisely knew how, were regarded by the practical monarch as a sufficient compensation for want of birth. Both sides—Beauvoisins as well as Vêrancours—were Protestants, but after that historical mass to which the Béarnois so promptly made up his mind as the price for the Crown of France, Vêrancours and Beauvoisins, and the greater part of their families, went all in a heap together back again into the venerable bosom of Mother Church. Of the old Beauvoisin race there were soon none left. They had dated from before the Crusades, and had never been anything but warriors, who, being inapt at learning any useful art or trade, had been absorbed by those who could. It was an act of grace and honesty on the part of the Vêrancour people that they did not assume the name of the extinct

family, but they assumed a vast deal more than its pride, and a more over-bearing set never were known. Their own name, their patronymic, dating from the thirteenth century, was Saunier; which made it probable that some ancestor of theirs had originally dug or traded in salt from the salt-marshes of Brittany; but of this name, which, associated with that of Vêrancour, they had borne under the Valois kings, all trace was rubbed out even in their own memories. They were "sons of crusaders" to all intents and purposes, had grown prejudiced precisely in the inverse ratio to their power, and were landed in this hard high-pressure nineteenth century of ours with all the attributes and incapacities belonging to races whose *raison d'être* is no more.

There was an enormous difference between

these last descendants of the Sauniers de Vêrancour and their own great grandfathers of the Court of Versailles. These people believed in themselves, whilst the others made believe to do so. The wealthy “ennoblis” of the times of Louis XIV. and Louis XV. shared with a large number of grand seigneurs the consciousness of the surprise their own fathers would have felt at seeing the grandeur they had achieved.\* Whereas after the destroying angel of ’89 had jumbled the old and the new into one uniform mass, leaving no particular sign to any individual victim, all came together at the resurrection of 1815,—above all, too, after

\* The Duc de Gesvres (Potier), for instance, who upon one occasion at Court, addressed thus one of his colleagues:—“M. le Duc! what would our fathers in heaven say, if they could see us where we are?”

the grand tragi-comedy of the Empire,—as equal. From the equality of suffering they inferred the equality of caste, and swamping any minor differences, agreed to set themselves apart from the rest of their fellows.

To this plan the smallest provincial families, totally oblivious of their origin, adhered with marvellous tenacity, and what is more marvellous still, the rest of the world did its best to take them at their word. The priests honoured them, society tempted them, the really illustrious houses of the land intermarried with them, all governments coquetted with them, the peasantry sneered at them, and the bourgeoisie abhorred them, as if they sprang indisputably from Brahma's eyebrow or Jupiter's thigh. Whatever might be the purity or impurity of the blood in their

veins, they fully enjoyed the advantages and disadvantages of the position they attributed to themselves, and in many instances gave extraordinary examples of self-renunciation and of sacrifice to what they termed the respect for their names. Our friend, the worthy Vicomte de Vêrancour, was a fine specimen of his kind, of what he called his "order." He really was allied to whatever was noblest, not only in his department, but as far away as that magnificent temple whereof they of the Parisian Faubourg St. Germain are the high priests. He was very poor, had been obliged to educate poorly, and had condemned to many privations, his two daughters, whom he dearly loved; but he looked upon his poverty as a distinction, and thought it was his duty to behave as

he did, and that it was incumbent upon him at any cost to be what he called "true to his name."

The château at D—— might, ages ago, have been an agreeable abode, when its possessors had wealth sufficient to procure what were the relative comforts and luxuries of the period, but it was a miserable place for two young women to inhabit in our day. Built, as are often baronial castles in the west of France, considerably below the village or town dependent upon it in days of yore, its first unavoidable evil was dampness, and want of air on all sides save one. It was decidedly unwholesome;—no one denied that. Then, although it was not large of its kind, it was much too large for its inhabitants, and they had to huddle themselves into holes and corners, where

the torn and soiled furniture that had escaped the outrages of the past could be turned to the best use. Women, and more than any other, French women, can contrive to make something out of nothing, and by the time the two Mesdemoiselles de Véricour had been six months home from their convent at Poitiers, they really had converted the set of rooms appropriated to themselves and their father on the ground-floor into a presentable suite of chambers for a family of reduced means. There was enough of discomfort, as we English people might think,—you habitually entered the house through the kitchen, and in the Vicomte's study you would be suddenly reminded by the fall of something soft and plump upon the floor of the presence of frogs; but resignation was the virtue of this

family, and it was thought the right thing to submit to everything for the sake of—— what it might puzzle you or me to specify distinctly, but they knew, and were satisfied with their own magnanimity.

I have said that there was one side of the château which was open to the winds of heaven, and on that side a tolerably broad terrace, planted with acacias, lime and nut trees, delightfully cool and shady in summer, was the open-air boudoir of the two sisters, Félicie and Geneviève, or Vévette, as she was by abbreviation usually called. This had originally formed part of the castle ramparts, and had been one of the outworks meant to defend the town and fortress of D—— against any inroad on the part of the Bretons. If you crossed over the broad stone parapet on one side, you could see

down straight into a well-kept lane which led round the castle premises up to the town, and branched off about half a league lower down from the high road to Chôlet.

It was a bright beautiful October afternoon, a few days after the Vicomte's visit to Martin Prévost. The two sisters were sitting at the stone table at the end of the terrace. Baskets full of work and working materials were before them. The trees overhead were rich in their russet clothing, there was not a breath of wind stirring, and the warm soft sunlight flooded the meadows and pasture lands that spread out in front, and beyond the limit of the château's present domains.

"Is that the Angelus already?" asked Félicie, listening to the bell of the parish church of D—— ringing out six o'clock.

“Is Monsieur le Curé coming to supper to-night?”

“I think not,” was the reply.

In the provinces, and where the woman-kind of such families as these come together, it is impossible that a quarter of an hour should elapse without mention being made of a curé.

“Then suppose we look at the *Monde Illustré*,” observed Félicie, drawing from the bottom of the large work-basket, where they lay hidden, two or three back numbers of an illustrated journal which a cousin, living at Tours, a lady of a worldly turn of mind, was in the habit of sending now and then to the two girls. “What is the matter, Vévette; what are you dreaming of?” she added, looking at her sister, who, with her work laid down upon her knee.

was apparently gazing at vacancy, whilst the tears were gathering in her eyes.

“I was thinking of la mère Marie-Claire,” said Vévette gently; “the sound of the Angelus suddenly reminded me of her, and of our convent days.”

“La mère Marie-Claire was so devotedly fond of you, that it is no wonder you loved her, and regret her now she’s dead,” rejoined Félicie, with rather a sententious air; “but, for a well-born woman, I must say, Vévette, that a worse example can hardly be conceived than the one she gave.”

“Do you really think that, sister?” inquired the younger girl, timidly adding with a sigh: “Poor dear, sweet mère Marie-Claire! how lovely she was! and how like an angel she looked in the last few months of her life!”

“Vévette !” retorted the elder sister, with all the sternness so handsome a “saint” could command; “pray do not misapply terms. Mère Marie-Claire, who, I grieve to say, was distantly related to mamma, may have been a person to be pitied, and we will hope she is forgiven. Monsieur le Curé says it *is* allowable to pray for her. But she was assuredly no angel, and a more rebellious woman cannot be imagined. Why, she actually died of it ! What made her take the veil, pray, if not that she preferred being a nun to marrying the man her parents had chosen for her ?”

“But she said she could not love him,” argued humbly Vévette.

Félicie curled her lips proudly. “What has a well-born, piously brought up girl to do with such reasoning as that ?” she ex-

claimed. "The real fact is even worse than what I said just now; the real fact is, that the misguided woman took the veil because she could not marry the man she pretended she loved."

"But he was her equal. I believe he was her own cousin," urged Vévette, blushing deeply at her audacity.

"Equal, maybe," rejoined Félicie, "but they had no money between them, and the parents would not hear of it. No! mère Marie-Claire I hope repented of her errors, but in plain terms it cannot be denied that she positively died for love."

"And—really, Félicie," murmured her sister tremblingly, after a pause of a few seconds, "do you think that it is so very dreadful a crime?"

"Think?" retorted the other. "Oh,

Vévette ! mère Marie-Claire committed a greater sin than I could have thought her capable of, if in her long talks with you she put such improper ideas into your head. I hope you have confessed all this to Monsieur le Curé."

"I will," promised poor Vévette, turning her head ; "but I don't know that I ever thought of it all so much before. I don't know why I suddenly seemed to remember poor mère Marie-Claire so well. It must have been the Angelus. Do you remember the sound of our bell at the Visitation ?"

"No indeed, my dear," answered Félicie with a smile, and unfolding her newspapers. "Just look," she cried ; "here is the whole account of the Fêtes of the 15th August."

"But that's six weeks ago," objected Vévette.

“No matter; such things are always fresh. There was a grand ball at the Hôtel de Ville, and here is a long description of all the dresses.” And Félicie’s eye ran eagerly down the column, and she occasionally stopped to chronicle her admiration of some special toilet. “Oh, this must have been lovely!” she all at once exclaimed; “listen! pink crape with water-lilies, and the coiffure, water-lilies with pearls plaited into the hair. I wonder who wore that? I wonder if she was beautiful? When I am married, I shall enjoy a few weeks in Paris in the winter——”

“Félicie!”

“Why not? It is the right thing to do. Of course I should not go to the Hôtel de Ville balls,—though I believe now, there are some people who do; but our relations

and Monsieur de Champmorin's too, in the Faubourg St. Germain, give magnificent fêtes."

"And you will go to Paris, sister?" asked Vévette. "I should be frightened out of my senses if I only set my foot in one of its streets. Why, it is worse than Babylon!"

"Possibly," replied the other demurely; "but when a well-born woman is married she owes a great deal to her name and position in the world, and to her husband and his family. She must make sacrifices every day. All Monsieur de Champmorin's family live more or less in Paris, and I believe his uncle wishes him to be a Deputy. I must think of him, and of the future position of our children."

It was not in Vévette's gentle heart to

retaliate, but in her heart she questioned whether Félicie ought not also to betake herself to confession, and submit to Monsieur le Curé her strange mental preoccupations touching pink crape dresses, and head-dresses composed of water-lilies and pearls interwoven in the hair. Vévette rose from her seat, and leant over the wall of the old rampart.

“Good evening, mademoiselle,” drawled out a languid voice from the road beneath.

“Félicie,” said Vévette, turning round, “it is Monsieur Richard. He has got little Charlot behind him with a basket full of fish.”

Félicie joined her sister, and with condescending grace looked down on Monsieur Richard. He lifted up the green leaves in the basket, and discovered a fine fat carp.

“That is a good big fish,” he remarked carelessly ; “the rest are not worth much ;” and then deferentially raising his broad-brimmed felt hat, made his request. “Would it be too great presumption,” he asked, “if I requested the favour of presenting my personal respects to Monsieur le Vicomte some day soon, before leaving D—— ?”

“Dear me !” Monsieur Richard, rejoined Félicie, “are you about to leave D—— ? Has Monsieur votre oncle obtained some Government situation for you ?”

“Not that,” was the answer, “but my uncle is kind enough to think that at three-and-twenty it is well to see something of the world, and I am going to Paris for some months.”

“To Paris !” ejaculated both the sisters

at once. "Will you not be dreadfully lonely without any friends or acquaintances? In such a place as Paris, what will you do with yourself?"

"Well," retorted the young man, "I do not think anybody with plenty of money to spend is likely to remain long lonely in Paris, and my uncle has been very generous to me."

"Indeed," said Félicie. "Well, I am sure I wish you success, Monsieur Richard. Any day before breakfast you can come to the Château. I daresay papa will receive you. Bon soir."

The day was waning, and the two girls gathered up their work, Vévette carrying the basket.

"The idea of that old Prévost sending his nephew to Paris!" remarked Félicie. "I wonder what will become of him!"

“But you know, don’t you, that he is to be enormously rich?” remarked Vévette.

“What they call rich,” added scornfully her sister.

“What any one would call rich,” urged Vévette. “Why, Félicie, they say old Prévost has above a hundred thousand francs a year, and he will leave every penny to Monsieur Richard. You’ll see he’ll marry one of the daughters of those nouveaux riches, and buy all D—— one of these fine days.”

“A hundred thousand francs a year,” repeated musingly Félicie, as they prepared to enter the house. “He’ll give his wife diamonds and run horses at the races.” And then she sighed, and said devoutly, “What a horrible state of things!”

## CHAPTER IV.

### MARTIN PRÉVOST'S AMBITION.

A WEEK passed by. It was the 12th of October. Old Prévost had called his nephew into his room, and there the two sat together, on either side of the long bureau-table, while the legendary “caisse de sureté” raised its cumbrous shape between the two windows, right in front of Monsieur Richard, whilst his uncle sat with his back towards it.

There was no resemblance between them ; —not one single trait in common had they.

The uncle's hard, sharp, vulture-like features were not reproduced in the rather weak mould in which those of the nephew had been cast. The old man's thin lips were very different from the full, red, sensual mouth of the young man opposite to him, and his piercing eyes utterly outshone Monsieur Richard's mild blue ones, with their rather vague, wandering glances. One thing was a pity ; Monsieur Richard's eyelids were delicate, and every now and then got inflamed, which took from the pleasantness of his aspect, for he really was otherwise what may be termed good-looking. There was, if you will, a certain dulness in his air ; I won't say that he looked exactly stupid, but there was a total absence of light about him. You would swear that if he had been in the place of any of his elders

of the Prévost stock, he would never have known how to make the fortunes they had made. No; stiff, sharp old Martin Prévost, as he sat there, straight-backed and all of a piece, was the evident superior of that fair-haired, round-faced, delicate young man. But then this is a degenerate age, and the money having been made by wiser, stronger men, it was enough that the mediocre but truly amiable inheritor of it all should make a good use of it;—and that Monsieur Richard undoubtedly would do.

“Now that I have given you most of the necessary details about your stay in Paris, and the principal friends you will find there,” said old Prévost, continuing a conversation begun some half an hour before, “it is necessary that I should inform you of what my plans for your future are.”

“Any that you form I shall follow,” replied the nephew with a bow.

“Yes,” answered the old man as blandly as it lay in his nature to do. “I have never had any complaint to make of you, Richard ; you have always been obedient and well-conducted ; and though you have no turn for affairs, I consider you thoroughly capable of doing credit to the position I have achieved. You start from where I leave off, Richard. I remain a plodding plebeian. You must be a gentleman. You must complete yourself by marriage. I have told you ever since you were a boy of fifteen to look forward to that. I have told you to familiarise yourself with the people down at the Château as much as you could. Well ! why do you shake your head ?”

“Because, dear uncle, I have tried, but

they won't let me ! They are familiar enough with me, for that matter, but it is the familiarity that is used towards an inferior."

"They don't know how rich you are," interrupted old Prévost.

Monsieur Richard shook his head again. "To say the whole truth," he added, "the Vicomte treats me like a lacquey."

"Bah !" broke out old Prévost with a fierce bitterness of contempt, "they would marry a lacquey if he only brought them money enough. I tell you, nephew, you shall be Monsieur le Vicomte's son-in-law. I am in treaty now for the domain of Châteaubréville down in the Mayenne, and before the year is out you shall be Monsieur Prévost de Châteaubréville, and your noble spouse,"—this was said with a sneer,—

“shall do the honours of your house to the whole department. I do not destine you to be a Deputy, Richard. I mean to keep that for myself,” and the old man looked as he spoke capable of sterner efforts than are required to compel the attention of the Corps Législatif. “I will be the Deputy, you shall be of the Conseil-Général. Who knows? President of it, perhaps. Money will do anything! And I will carry through the direct line of railway from Paris. When once we’ve got that,—besides the new coal-fields,—it shall be my fault if any of the new men in Paris,—were it even the Péreires themselves,—are richer than me. But the first thing is your marriage.”

Monsieur Richard’s eyes had been actually flashing light all this while, as he listened to his uncle’s words. He knew

old Prévost's indisputable capacity, and knew also how small men had made enormous fortunes ; and at the concluding phrase he blushed all over with delight.

“ If it were possible, dear uncle,” he exclaimed, “ it would indeed be a brilliant dream for——”

“ Probably,” interrupted the old man, “ you’ve gone and formed some inclination, as people call it, for that scornful princess ; that is of no sort of consequence ;” and he waved his hand, as if setting aside all such nonsense ; “ but there is no harm in it. What is important is that I hold those Véraucours in my hand, and that on the day after to-morrow, on Thursday, at two o’clock, I shall put my signature side by side with Monsieur le Vicomte’s to an act that will make him my dependent. He has sold me

Les Grandes Bruyères. I have had all the acts and contracts made out. I pay him the money at two o'clock on Thursday next; but an hour after that I wouldn't advise Monsieur le Vicomte to play me any tricks, because I can destroy with one word the entire combination for which he wants the cash."

"You know I never question you, uncle," said Monsieur Richard; but he looked all interrogation.

"No; you are exceedingly discreet," replied old Prévost, "and as the whole concerns you, I will trust you.—The Vicomte must have sixty thousand francs, or Champmorin won't marry the girl. I give him seventy thousand, and the marriage takes place. But by this proceeding he defrauds the other sister, for he has literally not a

farthing left to give her. The château won't sell for twenty thousand francs ; and if I show the real state of the case to Champmorin's notary, the business is done. Champmorin will withdraw, for he would have to refund,—besides all the *éclat* of the matter ; and then Monsieur le Vicomte would have both his daughters upon his hands, and be minus the only bit of tolerable property he had to dispose of."

" But, uncle ! " stammered the young man, upon whose countenance there had gathered all this while a cloud of anxiety that his interlocutor did not notice. " Uncle, I knew nothing of all this ! Which of the sisters is going to be married ? "

" Which ? " echoed old Prévost, impatiently. " Why Mademoiselle Félicie, to be sure ; who else should it be ? With

whom are we concerned, if not with Vévette ?”

His nephew gasped, and, for a moment or two, could not speak.

“Why, what ails the boy ?” exclaimed old Prévost, transfixing the unhappy Monsieur Richard with a look that was full of the bitterest contempt. “You haven’t been offering your hand, have you, to Monsieur de Champmorin’s charming bride ; to that —— ?” Here he stopped short, and no epithet came, but the expression of his countenance was not complimentary to Mademoiselle Félicie. “Richard !” he resumed, in a very calm tone, “you will do well to listen to what I say : I have decided that Mademoiselle Geneviève shall be your wife, and on that condition I have told you what a position you shall enjoy ;

but if any obstacle to that arrangement were to come from you, I would immediately alter my will, and instead of being a rich man and a personage one of these days, you should find yourself all at once in the position of my grandfather when he began life. I would not leave you one centime."

Poor Monsieur Richard was pale as death, and seemed as though he were internally convulsed. Externally he trembled a little.

"Uncle," said he in an unsteady voice, "you never told me that you preferred one of the sisters to the other, and——"

"Told you!" echoed old Prévost; "why should I go explaining my intentions to you, before the time was come to act?"

"But, dear uncle," pleaded Monsieur Richard, "it was not my fault if——"

"Who cares whether it is your fault or

not?" retorted Martin Prévost. "One thing be well assured of, that while I live Mademoiselle Félicie shall never be my niece. You idiot!" he added; "it is so like the wretched weaklings of your kind, the miserable products of this sensual age, to be attracted by a girl of that description. Why, you would not have been her husband half a year before you would be coming here to me whining and crying to be delivered from her! I know that young lady, though she doesn't yet know herself. I knew her grandmother, Monsieur le Vicomte's blessed mother, and that girl is every inch Madame Dorothée;—la belle Madame Dorothée! Yes, handsome she was, God knows, and some few are living who remember what she was besides;—all of which didn't prevent her going to mass

every day of her life, and to confession twice a month,—for she was by way of being a *dévôte*, too,—though devotion was easier to manage thirty or forty years ago than it is now, since the reign of the Jesuits in France.”

“But, uncle,” ventured to say the unhappy youth, “*Mademoiselle Félicie* is not yet nineteen, and has only been a year out of a convent. She cannot yet——”

“Nonsense !” interrupted old *Prévost* ; “hold your tongue, Richard, about the whole thing. It shall not be. And now, as this topic must never be reverted to, I will just once for all speak my mind to you, and you will reflect upon what I say, and see if you can agree. You are like all the men of your time. They call themselves men.” This was uttered with an inde-

scribable sneer. "You are dishonest." The nephew started. "I don't mean that you would steal; but you won't pay. You want to enjoy, to enjoy always, without doing anything else, and you want to escape paying for it; that's what I call dishonest, and that is the characteristic of you all. The men of my time worked and paid its full price for whatever they achieved. Look at me; I've worked for forty years,—worked hard, and plodded not only through work, but through privations and through humiliations. Do you suppose I should ever have been as wealthy as I am if they who have helped to enrich me had dreamt I was ambitious? No! I have been scrupulously honest according to the present value of the word, but I have profited by the weaknesses of my neighbours, and I should

never have known them if I had been thought of as anything save 'le bon homme Prévost.' Wealth! power even! they don't mind that, so long as they fancy you can never use it to trouble their vanity. I ambitious! Bless my soul! I was only a money-getting machine, a humble, narrow-minded bourgeois, who knew nothing of politics, but only put sou upon sou and helped his betters out of difficulties by lending them the sums they couldn't get elsewhere! I, 'le bon homme Prévost!' Lord bless you, I didn't exist! But now, my time is come, too, and I will have my enjoyment, for I have paid for it."

"And no one will be so rejoiced at your success as I shall be," put in the nephew cautiously.

"I am only sixty-two," continued Martin

Prévost, careless of the interruption. "I have the strength of unspent years in store, for I have capitalised my health, as well as my money. I have fifteen years before me, during which I will have my enjoyment. I shall remain, as I told you, a plodding plebeian, but I will plod to some purpose, and on a higher field than I have had yet. There is the good of the empire; the forces from below come into play now, and the forces from above are annihilated, though they don't see it. They get the titles, and crosses, and Chamberlain's keys, and their vanity is content; they have nothing else; but we of the lower ranks get the power. Now you see, Richard, I will make a gentleman of you, and you shall represent something. But I will rule your fortunes, and will not have for

my niece a woman who would try to rule me."

Monsieur Richard permitted himself a vehement gesture of *dénégation*.

"Stuff!" said the uncle, sternly. "Mademoiselle Félicie was just the sort of girl to seize hold of a weak and vicious imagination. Don't be offended, Richard! The imaginations of the young men of your age now-a-days are all vicious, because the men are all weak;—all half-natures! But that is no matter. Mademoiselle Félicie will be Madame de Champmorin in six weeks, and when I have paid the money down for Les Grandes Bruyères, the Vicomte, in spite of his pride, will not refuse me Mademoiselle Vévette, who is really an excellent girl, and manageable. When you come back from Paris, Monsieur Prévost de

Chateaubréville, you shall marry her, and when you are somewhat over forty you will inherit all my wealth, be a personnage, I tell you again, and marry your own daughters to penniless marquises or even dukes, if you choose."

"Oh ! uncle, uncle !" sighed his nephew.

The countenance of old Prévost underwent a slight change. Looking steadfastly at Monsieur Richard,—looking at him, as it were, through and through, he said,—  
"I'll tell you what you think would be just and proper. You think that because you are young you ought to be able to satisfy all your desires ; you would like to have the position I can give you, and the woman you choose to fancy, besides ; you would like my earnings and your own will. No, no, Richard, you must pay too ; you

must pay by submission and by patience ! After to-morrow Mademoiselle Félicie will be out of your reach. You must make up your mind to it. You will have the estate of Chateaubréville, and a Demoiselle de Vérancour for the mother of your children, who will be very rich ; and what have you done for all that ?” and he took in the whole of his nephew, as it were, at one glance, and said, scornfully, “ Nothing !”

Poor Monsieur Richard ! He shrunk together, and attempted no further resistance. It might be very painful, but, as Mephisto says, “ He was neither the first, nor would he be the last.” This same conversation has been gone through, or will be gone through, by more or less every son and every nephew in France ; therefore the hardship is after all a common one.

When the conversation was ended, poor Monsieur Richard begged his uncle's pardon for having dreamt of thwarting him, and promised he would do his best to get over his disappointment and accept his uncle's plans for him with fitting readiness and gratitude. Poor young man! The traces of the struggle were visible on his face, by its increased pallor, by the redness of his eyelids, and by a circle of dark blue that had hollowed itself under his eyes.

All was over. Monsieur Richard was to leave for Paris in a week, and next Thursday Mademoiselle Félicie was to be in possession of a dot that would enable her to become Madame de Champmorin.

But Destiny sometimes foils even the best calculators. When Thursday came, old Martin Prévost was lying at the foot of

his great big iron safe, his face upon the floor, his two arms stretched out before him, and the back of his head beaten in by blows. The master of the strong box was murdered, the strong box was broken open, and all the ready money in bank notes and cash had disappeared. There had been what we call burglary, and what the French law terms "vol avec effraction."

## CHAPTER V.

### POOR MONSIEUR RICHARD'S RICHES.

THE effect produced by such a tragedy in a little place like D——, does not require to be described. For twenty miles round it spread its terror; but in the centre of action itself, it exercised a vivifying power. The collective life of D—— was quintupled. Every one's mind was busy upon the same subject, and at the same time. If a conversation began on any other topic, it was sure, before five minutes were over, to find its way round to the assassination of Martin

Prévost; and, whether they who conversed were peasants or shopkeepers, you would have been equally astonished, had you overheard them, to note the extraordinary aptitude of all for the discharge of duties appertaining to the police. Each man,—and, for that matter, each woman, too,—had his or her notion about the murderer, and was the inventor of a trap in which the criminal must be infallibly caught, and which, on the part of the said inventor, proved a wiliness, a depth of calculation, and an instinct of the manners and ways of crime, that so far as the moral condition of this rural population was concerned, was not pleasant. The officers of justice only seemed gifted with true administrative dullness, and the process of “instruction,” as it is called, elicited, as it dragged on its

pedantic course, remarks not flattering to judicial sharpness from the public. For the public knew everything, however secret ; and, above all, whatever was surrounded with unusual precautions as to secrecy. The greffier of the Juge de Paix talked to his wife ; the Maire talked to his married daughter ; the huissier du tribunal confided in his *bonne* ; the doctor who had examined the body transmitted his impressions to all his patients ; and all the *dévotés* discussed the matter with Monsieur le Curé and his Vicaire. Then the beadle, who was married to Madelon, the Maire's cook, and the sacristan, whose wife collected the money for the chairs during divine service, and was charwoman twice a week at the private establishment of the principal grocer,—all these served as so many channels of com-

munication, and from conduit to conduit conveyed the whole current of information from its head source in the cabinet of the Juge d'Instruction down to the kitchen of the humblest ménagère. But the worst of all was the brigadier de gendarmerie. This official, by name Frédérick Herrenschmidt, a gigantic Alsatian, was the devoted and pretty well avowed suitor of Madame Jean ; and from " Monsieur Frédéri," as she styled him, awful as he might be to the general public of D——, she contrived to extract the minutest details. Madame Jean was reputed a rich woman, and being the widow of a lazy drunkard, to whom she was married twenty-five years back, and whose backslidings she had brooded over during a twenty years' widowhood, she had never brought herself to trust sufficiently any

“man of woman born,” to resign to him the disposal of her little fortune. “Sophie,” as her dead master (but he alone) called her, had been the presiding genius of the Prévost household for a quarter of a century, and had never cheated old Martin of one sou. She made his interest hers, because he made hers his; and by dint of placing, as he had done, here a hundred francs, and there a hundred francs of her savings during this long space of time, Madame Jean was possessed of somewhere about the sum of twenty thousand francs, and this wealth of hers was the cause that, court her as he might, she could not make up her mind to marry the gendarme. Madame Jean was a fine bold specimen of a strong-nerved French female of forty-five; but though her vanity was well

developed, her caution and covetousness overtopped it. She liked to overawe the wives and maidens of D—— as the sharer of the military authority of the place, and she not only tolerated, but exacted the utmost homage of Monsieur Frédéri; but to take him, for better for worse, was what she could not resolve to do, for she had a shrewd notion that however much a union with this stalwart son of Mars might be the better for her, it would probably be the worse for her money. So Madame Jean, who had no human being to leave her riches to, and who never spent anything, but went on saving, refused to become Madame Herrenschmidt, but reigned supreme over the soul of the brigadier, and was possessed of all the knowledge he had no business to impart.

Whatever her other faults, Madame Jean had all the helpfulness of a Frenchwoman, and, had it not been for her care and activity and sense, poor Monsieur Richard would have died, or gone mad, from the effect of his uncle's sudden and terrible death. Richard Prévost was no hero,—that the reader scarcely requires to be told,—and since it was proved to him that the house he inhabited had been broken into, that an assassin had actually passed before the door of the room in which he slept, in order to creep up the stairs and enter his uncle's room immediately over his head, the unfortunate young man seemed possessed by the idea that the same thing might happen again any day, and that the next victim would inevitably be himself.

“You don't expect me to come and sleep

in your room, do you," cried Madame Jean, hoping to rouse him by indignation, "as Prosper's wife used to do when you were a little child?"

"Certainly not, my dear Madame Jean; but I cannot help thinking that it would be a proper precaution if the brigadier were to sleep in the house."

At this Madame Jean drew herself up, as though she had been already the gendarme's lawful spouse, and told Monsieur Richard that he was ignorant of the stern obligations of *le devoir militaire*!

"Nicolas can sleep in the passage," suggested she. Nicolas was the out-door man.

"Nicolas?" was the distrustful reply.

"Well, you don't think he would let himself be killed and carried away without making a noise, do you?"

But Monsieur Richard shook his head and seemed to incline towards a totally different kind of alarm, at which Madame Jean exclaimed—"For shame! it is unchristianlike and unlawful to be suspecting everybody in that way. Why, Monsieur Richard, there's no end to that kind of thing! You'll be suspecting me, next! Poor old Prosper!—though I never liked him with his nasty underhand sulky ways—still, I do feel for him now."

"So do I," rejoined Richard; "but you cannot say I have done or said anything to incriminate him; for, strange to say, from the very first, something seemed to tell me that the man was not guilty."

"And I believe you are quite right, Monsieur Richard." And, coming nearer to him, and speaking cautiously, "I happen to

know," added Madame Jean, "that there is not so much as the shadow of a proof;—nay, more—there's no ground on which you can rest even a suspicion touching Prosper Morel. I have no business to go revealing all this; but I do know it, and I go out of my direct duty to tell it you because your nerves are all jarred and out of order by this dreadful event, and it may comfort you to know that you have not had an assassin going about the house. You might get into a way of suspecting everybody. Your nerves are terribly shattered."

"Yes, they are; you are right there; but surely there has been enough to shake the nerves of a stronger man than me; and alas! I never was strong; but I am glad about poor old Prosper; as you say, he is not a pleasant person; but to be accused of

such a heinous crime ! Brrrr !” and he shuddered all over, “that must be fearful. Poor man ! we must try and make it up to him somehow.”

As the reader will have guessed, the first direction taken by the suspicions of justice was towards Prosper Morel. The man’s character, the circumstance of the complaint made against him a week before by the Maire and taken up so vigorously by his employer that his dismissal had been decided upon by the latter,—all this naturally militated against the woodcutter, and before the day of the murder was ended a mandat d’améner had been made out, and the gendarmes had arrested Prosper. They found him at his work, a good way out in the forest, and his behaviour at once introduced into Monsieur Frédéri’s mind certain

doubts of his culpability. It was evening when they discovered him, sitting astride upon a newly-felled tree, whose last branches he was leisurely lopping off, whilst he droned out a gloomy Breton cantique to the Holy Virgin. He was just finishing his day's work, and preparing to go home to his hut. When he perceived the gendarmes before him he saluted them civilly, and was about to gather up his tools. They seized him, before explaining to him why; but when the explanation came he was stupefied, not alarmed. The brigadier was an old hand, and had experience in criminals, and he felt instinctively that the bûcheron was not one. The man was stolidly unconscious, and his complete ignorance of what had passed was evident and undeniable. Nevertheless, he was immediately imprisoned,

preventively, severely treated, harassed and worried in every possible way, examined and cross-examined, and the palpable proofs of his innocence, which seemed to increase almost hourly, were received with regret by his pursuers—but they were received. Beyond presumption, nothing pointed at Prosper in the details of the crime,—except that it must have been committed by some one who was intimately acquainted with old Prévost's habits, and with the ways of his house.

The mode of the assassination was tolerably clear. The victim must have been standing in front of his safe when the blow was dealt. The blow was dealt from behind, and with extraordinary coolness and certainty and force. Of the three medical men who were called in to visit the corpse, all

were of the same opinion,—namely, that the first blow had suspended life, and that when the others were given, they were dealt merely to make assurance doubly sure. There was comparatively little blood, and what there was had flowed downwards upon the floor, after the murdered man had fallen. None had spurted out, and there were no stains on any article of furniture.

Now, as to the time at which the act was committed, that was also easy to determine; it must have been between the hours of six and ten in the morning. Old Prévost was a perfectly wound-up machine as to his habits, and never deviated from the monotonous regularity he had marked out for himself. Summer and winter, he always rose at five. At six he sat down to his bureau, and busied himself with accounts

and calculations till eight. At eight he sometimes took a stroll in the garden, or even a short walk out of doors, but as often he remained in his own room. Till ten o'clock began striking it was not necessary that any one should be acquainted with the whereabouts of Martin Prévost; but when the tenth stroke had struck from a dusty, wheezy old clock in the passage, instantly the voice of Madame Jean was to be heard calling out in a loud tone, "Monsieur, the breakfast is served."

Now, when, on that fatal Thursday, Madame Jean's voice had sent forth its regular call, nothing stirred. Madame Jean's temper was at once irritated by this piece of unpunctuality, and after three minutes had elapsed she repeated the summons. Still no answer. Madame Jean

ascended the stairs, angrily opened the door of her master's room, and saw the sight we have described in our last chapter. Her screams attracted Monsieur Richard, who was in attendance in the dining parlour, awaiting his uncle's presence. The poor young man, whose nervous system was less robust than Madame Jean's, was so overcome by the ghastly scene, that he fainted dead away, and Madame Jean had to raise him as well as she could, and busy herself with recalling him to his senses. Before this was quite accomplished, she had opened a window, called Nicolas up from the stable-door in the yard below where he was attending to the old mare, and despatched him for the Juge de Paix and the Maire, and the doctor, and the all-important brigadier. As to the unhappy Monsieur Richard,

between sobbings, and spasms, and swoons, it was long past noon before any rational testimony could be extracted from him.

What was quickly enough realised was this small number of facts ;—Martin Prévost had been assassinated after he was dressed, and had begun his daily occupations, consequently, between the hours of six and ten. He had been struck from behind by a heavy blunt instrument, no trace whereof could be found, and the blow had been dealt with such force that the probability was that the assassin was a man under middle age.

He had been murdered by some one entering the house from without, for the mode of entrance was discovered almost directly. At the end of the passage which divided the house, and ran from the street-

door to the yard-door, there was a small room, used for putting away everything in general; and from old boots and dirty linen on the floor, to fresh-made preserves put to set in their pots on the shelves, there was a little of everything in this *chambre de débarras*. It had one window opening into the yard, and a door opening into the passage. This door was seldom shut, and the window was never open. But a pane of glass had been taken out, through which a man's hand and arm could be introduced, and the window had been opened, for it was left open, and what was more, the iron bar and hasp, rusty, and liable to creak if suddenly turned, were rubbed all over with some filthy grease, found to be borrowed from pots, kept by Nicolas in his tool-house for greasing cart-

wheels. Through that window, then, the assassin had entered, and passing through the door into the passage, he had mounted the stairs up to Monsieur Prévost's room.

The reason of the crime was at once evident; it lay in the desire to rob. But the safe had not been broken into, as was at first supposed. The safe had been opened, and probably by old Prévost himself.

But then, the ingress of the assassin accounted for, how about his egress? Every fact successively discovered, pointed to the precise moment of the crime as somewhat before seven, for Nicolas had been ordered, the night before, by Martin Prévost himself, to be at the post-office by seven, punctually, to post some business letters, and thus gain several hours by

taking advantage of what was called the night post, instead of waiting for the day post, which only went out at three. He had gone out at half-past six, and was found not to have returned much before eight. Madame Jean had gone, as she frequently did, to six o'clock mass, and, as she also frequently did, had passed from the church into the sacristy, and had a bout of conversation with the Vicaire, and she was certain of having returned shortly after half-past seven.

In one hour, then, between half-past six and half-past seven, had the deed been done, for the house was deserted then, and young Monsieur Richard fast asleep, for he slept late at all times, and, especially since his illness, he scarcely ever woke before half-past eight or nine.

But next came the question of escape. How, at that hour, had the murderer escaped? The court-yard, being paved, yielded no trace of a footmark, but in the garden beyond there were some traces of a boot or shoe very different from any that could be matched by the foot of anybody in or around the house. These traces were lost at a hedge, then found again in a field beyond, then utterly lost on the banks of the river close to the Chôlet high road.

Nothing in all this, as the reader will see, squared the least with the notion of Prosper Morel as the murderer. Still the fact remained of his master having turned him off, and of his having been heard to threaten his master. In this, however, Monsieur Richard was at once his best and worst witness; for, though he could not

deny the threat made by Prosper in his presence, yet, aided by Madame Jean, he had been the means of bringing him back into his uncle's service, if not favour; and Madame Jean deposed that Prosper's gratitude to all, and, above all, to his master, for giving him another chance, was loud, deep, and sincere. So said Monsieur le Curé, who had been instructed to admonish Prosper, and who had been, he said, edified by the man's behaviour on that occasion.

Notwithstanding all this, Prosper Morel was kept preventively in prison, and having no other presumable culprit under its claw, French law gave itself its habitual delight in torturing, as much as possible, the one it had caught. However, even French law has a limit to its harshness and narrow-mindedness, and without one single shadow

of a proof, Prosper's detention could not last. The man's behaviour in prison was irreproachable. He was mostly silent, and absorbed in the study of a well-thumbed book of prayers. When not silent, he either sang his Breton cantiques or prayed aloud for the soul of his murdered master. None of his guardians liked him, but there were not two opinions about his innocence. Besides, to his credit be it spoken, Monsieur Richard, so soon as the first shattering effect of the crime had a little worn off, did everything in his power to come to the bûcheron's aid ; and when each succeeding examination by the Juge d'Instruction brought forth the increased certainty of the crime having been committed by some one from without, whose identity could not by any means be brought to tally with that of the wood-

cutter, why, the woodcutter had to be released. So one fine day old Prosper went back to his hut, and recommenced his avocations. But so repellent was the man's nature, that the having been a victim to a false accusation did not make him interesting. His innocence was proved beyond all doubt, yet people shunned him as before, and he led a solitary life up in his woods.

The sum of ready money stolen was found, as nearly as any retrospective calculation could be made, to amount to about fifteen thousand francs—five thousand and odd hundreds in gold and silver, and the rest in notes. The numbers of all the notes had not apparently been taken, although in a little side drawer of Martin Prévost's bureau-table was found, with the date of 8th October written on it, a slip of paper

on which were marked down the numbers of three 1,000-franc notes and of two 500-franc ones. Of course the necessary measures were immediately taken to stop these notes, but of the others no trace could be obtained.

Two weeks passed over, and certainly no effort was spared. Officials came from neighbouring towns, and the Préfet of the chef-lieu du département wrote to Paris and came himself to D——, and a great stir was made ; but the mystery never allowed one corner of its veil to be lifted. There were examples of such mysteries in the judicial history of France, and the Prévost murder was destined to be a fresh one added to the list.

The person who did really create a lively and sincere interest everywhere, was poor

Monsieur Richard. For many miles round he was talked of and lamented over; and particularly when it was known how very rich he was, his neighbours fell into the habit of calling him, quite affectionately, “*ce pauvre Monsieur Richard.*”

Of a truth, when old Prévost's affairs came to be looked into, it was a matter for universal surprise to see how rich he had become. He had, for the last twenty or thirty years, conducted his financial business through men who did not know or communicate with each other. But at his death the accounts of all were forthcoming, and the Chôlet notary and a Paris notary, a Paris stockbroker and a Paris banker, all produced their books, and old Prévost was found to be possessed of double and treble the property, in various securities, that had

ever been supposed. Between land and floating investments, his fortune amounted to near upon three millions five hundred thousand francs ! Bundles of railway obligations there were, for instance, on such lines as the Orleans and St. Germain, which had never been touched since their creation, and which had more than doubled.

Poor Monsieur Richard ! It certainly diminished no one's interest in him when the notary at D—— produced Martin Prévost's will, by which, subject only to one or two small charges,—such as a provision for Madame Jean, who did not need it !—he left everything he possessed to his nephew. Richard Prévost's income was not far under one hundred and seventy thousand francs a year !

“ Indeed, sir,” said the notary at D——,

“your poor uncle was more attached to you than any one knows besides myself.”

“And even you do not know what I lose in losing him,” said the young man. And his last interview with his uncle seemed to have so deeply impressed him as to have almost cured him of his admiration for Mademoiselle Félicie.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE LOVERS.

IF the reader has not forgotten Monsieur le Vicomte's application to Martin Prévost touching the mortgage or sale of Les Grandes Bruyères, he will readily understand the singular embarrassment in which Monsieur le Vicomte found himself placed when, instead of a living money-lender he suddenly confronted the corpse of a murdered man. Things had reached a point when any retrograde steps would be likely to provoke a "scandal," as provincial news-

hawkers term it; and were Félicie's marriage with Monsieur de Champmorin to be definitively broken off, she might at once resign herself to the blessings of spinsterhood, for she had few or no "extraordinary resources," as Finance Ministers, in the face of a deficit, term it, to fall back upon. Félicie had got just now her one chance in hand. She would hardly get another. How should she? She could not be taken about to watering-places,—there was no money for that sort of thing,—and she could not even achieve a visit to Paris; for, besides the pecuniary question, she had no relation there who would take notice of her unmarried, or help her to get a husband! No; if any unlucky circumstance prevented Mademoiselle Félicie from becoming Madame de Champmorin, she would simply fall back

upon her father's hands, or she would have to make a *mésalliance*, and even of that—frightful as it was!—what likelihood was there in such an out-of-the-way place as D——?

It was altogether a dismal look-out, and such Monsieur le Vicomte felt it to be. Of course a man, even so hard pressed as he was, could not, for decency's sake, attempt to force on the discussion of his private affairs at the moment of so shocking a catastrophe as that of old Prévost's death. So he was obliged to wait and postpone the settlement with Monsieur de Champmorin's notary, under no matter what pretext. And this was not altogether easy. In France, when a marriage is being negotiated, the two persons who are to be joined together and made one can only, till that junction be operated, be fitly described as "hostile

parties." Those who act for them pass their lives in the exercise of the cunningest strategy, and to have "out-manœuvred the enemy" is glorious. True! it is a game of "who wins loses," for if the victory be gained the husband or wife may be lost.

Now if the Champmorin general attained to a full discovery of what had passed in the Vêrancour camp, he would, undoubtedly, raise his own reputation for sharpness and address, and be confided in largely by the fathers and mothers around, but he would cost his client a well-born, strictly brought up, and very charming wife. Vêrancour père knew that that consideration was a secondary one, and he did not disguise to himself the danger. Having explained, as well as he could, to his adversary that his own and his father's business had always

been managed by Martin Prévost, and that after the latter's retirement from his office he had preferred his advice to that of the notary who was his official successor, Monsieur le Vicomte contrived to obtain a respite from his future son-in-law's representative, and set to work to make the most he could of old Prévost's heir.

There was no kindness, no attention, that was not shown by the inmates of the Château to poor Monsieur Richard; and, though the quality of these advances was still of a patronising sort, yet they were very soothing to the unhappy young man, and he gladly accepted them; so that, by degrees, half his time came to be spent at the Château. He never grew to feel at home with this family, but the intercourse with them was pleasant, and took him out of himself.

With regard to Mademoiselle Félicie, there was assuredly a strange revulsion of feeling in young Prévost's heart and mind. You would have thought that she frightened him, and for the first few days of his intimacy, if such it can be called, at the Château, he almost seemed to shrink from her. Vévette, with her sweet gentle ways, her simple piety, and her instinct of consolation, attracted Richard at the outset far more than the fascinating Félicie, who had, as we know, before the recent tragedy, made such an impression upon him. But this did not last; and the nephew of the deceased usurer and that born *Sœur de Charité*, Vévette, were, even when taken together, no match for Monsieur de Vérancour's eldest daughter. Before three weeks were past, Monsieur Richard was hopelessly secured, manacled,

and cast down enchained at the feet of the fair enslaver; and whilst he regarded his very adoration,—mute though it was,—as presumptuous, it would have been hard to say whether she condescended even to notice that she had inspired it.

The two sisters were very different; differing in beauty as in character and mind. Félicie was just nineteen, her younger sister seventeen and a half. They were in every respect two nearly perfect types of French womanhood,—of those two great divisions of the female sex in France, neither of which do we Englishmen ever thoroughly understand. The elder girl was a true representative of the by far larger class, which from Diane de Poitiers down to Madame Tallien or to Madame Recamier, through all the Chevreuses, Montespons, and Pompa-

dours of three centuries, has borne haughtily in hand the banner of feminine courage, activity, and intelligence, and gone unloving through history. The younger one personified that infinitely rarer order of women, humble and heroic at once, who from Jeanne d'Arc to Louise de la Vallière, worship the ideal, and accept martyrdom as a fitting punishment for having loved.

There is the one characteristic common to the two classes ;—both believe love to be an evil, a thing unholy, and in the negation whereof lies true sanctity. Only, whilst the one side achieves the triumph easily, and puts heart and soul into ambition and intellectual pursuits, the other side yields to the conqueror and accepts wretchedness and death as the fitting penance for having loved. Much of all this is owing to the

social constitution of France, somewhat more to the influence of the clergy and their curious interpretation of Catholic doctrines, but most of all to the conventual and physically ascetic education of well-born women. But for the pivot round which all social relations revolve in France, and on which depend all her immoralities, and a vast deal of her intellectual greatness, you need look no further than to the condemnation of love, held to as a principle by all Frenchwomen,—by those who act up to, as well as by those who are faithless to it.

Félicie de Vêrancour was the very incarnation of what is called a superior woman in France. She had latent in her all that might make one of the most famous of her kind. Self-possessed she was, proud, firm, and a slave to what she believed was duty.

Such women are, in France, extolled as high-principled because they are exempt from all passion. Their worst feature is, that they do nothing save upon calculation ; their best, that they really are superior to every circumstance. It is not in the power of poverty or misfortune, or even of death itself, to humble, or shake, or extinguish the spirit of a lady in France. This it is which wins for them, often wrongfully, their fame for devotedness. Nine-tenths are devoted to their high idea of themselves,—which may stand instead of a virtue. The tenth portion is devotion itself ; but the motive for the devotion is to be found in the idea of expiation. They have loved ! Therefore they must expiate.

Félicie was the perfection of the modern beauty of France ;—small, delicate, grace-

ful, refined ; every movement, every look, was feline ; and, once in her atmosphere, you were magnetised. She occupied and attracted you incessantly, raised all your curiosity, and never for one instant satisfied it.

As to Vévette—; but she is too well known to be portrayed. All nations and all ages know her. Italy calls her Juliet, Germany Gretchen ; we in England cannot name her, for she is legion ; in France only is she rare, for she is out of the social groove, and lives, however innocent or pure she may happen to be, in a perpetual state of terror and humiliation at the notion of her sin.

Well ! October was drawing to its close, and there seeming to be no chance of the gloomy mystery being fathomed, the Pré-

vost murder had ceased to be the sole preoccupation of the public mind at D——.

The weather was magnificent for the season, and, in exchange for Monsieur de Vérancour's attention to him, Richard Pré-vost gave the Vicomte permission to shoot over every acre of his land, of which permission the Vicomte profited to the utmost extent. Félicie's dominion over the poor young man had reached such a height that he had ceased having any over himself. He belonged to Félicie. And yet, if you had studied him well, you must have come to the conclusion that Monsieur Richard was not "in love."

One evening, towards the end of the month, Vévette was descending the little, narrow, stony path, leading from the parish church of D—— to a side entrance into the

gardens of the Château. She had a prayer-book in her hand.

As she turned a corner of the old wall, and thus was completely hidden from the side of the town, some one came from behind the bushes which skirted the path towards the open country, and a voice said, almost in a whisper, "Vévette !"

The girl stopped, and turned pale, "Oh ! how you frightened me, Raoul !" she said, clasping her prayer-book close upon her breast with both hands.

"Frightened you, Vévette !" was the rejoinder, in a tone of more sadness than reproach. "Alarm is not the feeling I wish to inspire, but I must speak to you, dearest ; I must indeed."

Vévette trembled, and looked thoroughly scared. "At this hour," she objected,

“and so near the house. It is too dangerous ! Suppose any one should see us. Good heavens, Raoul, how did you come ? why did you come here ?”

“Vévette, dearest !” was the answer, in a gentle tone, “I came here on foot from Mollignon, across the fields, and I came here because I tell you again that I must see you. I calculated that, as this was Saturday, you would certainly be going to confession at your usual hour, and that as you came home I could meet you ; but you are coming back an hour earlier than usual, —has anything happened ?”

“Yes,” replied she ; “Monsieur le Curé has been sent for to administer poor old Gayrard, the blacksmith, who is dying, and he can only be in the confessional this evening.”

The young man came close to the trembling girl, and took one of her hands in his, which apparently increased her alarm tenfold. "Vévette," pleaded he, tenderly, "we have a whole hour to ourselves. You will not be expected home before six, and it has not yet struck five. Now listen to me, darling;" and he drew closer to her side; "there may be a certain danger in talking here, as we are now doing; it is not likely that any one will pass this way, which leads only from your gate to the church,—still it is within possibility; there will be no danger at all if you will come down as far as the Pavilion, and let me go in there with you."

The girl shuddered. "Into the Pavilion, Raoul?" she exclaimed. "Why what would become of us, if——;" she hesi-

tated. "What would happen supposing my father——"

"Where is your father?" interrupted Raoul.

"Out shooting in the woods belonging to La Grande Ferme."

"Oh! his new friend, Monsieur Richard's woods," observed he with a smile. "And Félicie?"

"Félicie is at home, hard at work at the altar carpet we are to give Monsieur le Curé at All Saints'."

"And, rely upon it, Monsieur Richard is in attendance upon her," added the young man, with an expression of bitter disdain. "I should not be permitted to be alone with either of you for two minutes; but that bourgeois-millionnaire may pay his court at all hours."

“For shame, Raoul,” retorted Vévette. “He has gone through such an awful trial ; and besides, poor Monsieur Richard, he is of no consequence !”

During this little parley, Raoul had managed to obtain undisputed possession of Vévette’s hand, and in the end he also persuaded her to come with him into what he called the Pavilion.

This was no other than a kind of garden-house, built into the wall of the old rampart. It lay immediately under the terrace on which, some days since, we saw the two sisters sitting at work, and was entered by a glass door, which opened upon a narrow path of the kitchen-garden. A small gate in the wall gave ingress from the lane into the garden, and of this gate Vévette kept the key ; for it was through

it she let herself out and in, when she went to the church or the presbytère. The only occasions on which Vévette or her sister ever moved about alone were these. The church and presbytère had originally been dependencies of the Château, and the small number of servants in the Vérancour household made it convenient that sometimes the young ladies should venture unattended from their own garden-gate to the sacristy-door.

In the interior of the Pavilion there were two rooms ; one rather large, the other a mere dark closet, at the back, without a window.

When the pair had entered and closed the glass door, the young man threw off his hat, and raising Vévette's hand to his lips, kissed it silently, and with a sort of grave rapture. She laid her prayer-book down.

What a handsome pair they were ! She all grace, and softness, and tenderness, and humility ; and he all fire and energy, and made, as it seemed, to protect her. Vévotte was the first to speak. He appeared to have forgotten why they were there.

“ Raoul,” said she, “ why have you forced me to come here ? What have you to say to me ? ”

Holding her hand, which he took from his lips, in one of his, he, with the other arm, encircled her waist, and pressed her to him fondly. Her head just reached his chin, and as he bent down towards her, he could not choose but kiss her beautiful fair hair ; but he did so reverently.

“ Don’t tremble so, my own,” murmured he, almost inaudibly,—for she quivered like a leaf. “ You do not, you cannot

fear me," and he drew her still closer to him.

Vévette was all pallor, and then again all one blush, and panting with terror and emotion. "What will become of us!" she cried; and with a sudden, childlike impulse, she hid her face upon her lover's shoulder, and burst into tears.

Gently as a mother stills her babe did Raoul strive to calm and pacify Vévette. "My very own," said he, when the first paroxysm was over, "if you will follow my counsels, and if you can rely upon yourself, all will come right. Only answer me two questions, Do you love me, Vévette?" and as he uttered the words, he looked at her with his whole soul in his eyes. She gave no reply in words, but as her eyes sank before his, she again hid her face on his

breast, and a tremor, a kind of electric vibration, passed over her frame.

“ Well, then,” resumed Raoul, apparently satisfied, “ will you consent to be bargained away to some man you cannot love, as your sister will be? Will you betray and destroy me, out of weakness ? ”

Vévette turned round and looked imploringly at her lover. “ What am I to do, Raoul ? ” she pleaded. “ Obedience to my father is my most sacred, my first duty.”

“ No, Vévette, it is not so,” interrupted Raoul firmly. “ Truth to me is now your first duty. You have given me your heart and soul, and you must be true to me, or be unworthy.”

“ Oh ! Raoul, Raoul ! ” wept the agonised girl, “ there is my sin ; and for that sin we shall both suffer ! ”

“Vévette, there is your virtue, and virtue is strength. Our love can save us, but it must be strong. We are going to be separated,”—this was uttered with a visible effort. “Don’t be alarmed, my sweet one; there is no separation between those who really love. We shall be nearer to each other when I am in Paris and you here, than you and any of those who are side by side with you will be. I am not afraid of the trial, Vévette, and therefore you need not be so. My father sends me to Paris to enter the offices of the *Ministre de la Marine* as an unpaid clerk,—the interest of my uncle the Admiral has achieved this enviable position,—but that is merely the beginning. I have another plan. I will make my own career for myself.”

“Raoul!” interrupted Vévette, aghast

at her lover's boldness. "And your father!"

"My father will in the end approve, because he will be unable to help himself, for I will distinguish myself and bring fresh honour to his name. But that is all a matter of mere detail, and we have not time for it now; the one thing of importance to us is, to be sure of each other. We are very soon to be parted, darling. Will you wait for me, and will you one day be my wife?"

Vévette's look of mute despair told the entire tale of her mistaken education.

"Will you promise me," continued Raoul, compassionately, "to withstand all attempts to marry you to any one else?"

"Raoul!" exclaimed she with energy, and as though illuminated by a sudden in-

spiration, "I will promise you to take the veil rather than marry any one else. That I can do, and that I will do."

"Poor child!" rejoined her lover gravely; "and so work out the misery and death of both yourself and me. And this is what they call religious teaching! Now listen to me, Vévette," and he put both his arms round her.

"Hush!" whispered she, breaking from him hurriedly; "there is some one coming down the path this way; we are lost!"

"Be calm, Vévette," said Raoul, with authority; "I will hide myself there in the dark closet. Open the door directly; meet whoever it is with assurance, and try to draw them away from the Pavilion."

Vévette obeyed mechanically; took up her garden hat, opened the glass door, and

found herself face to face with Richard Prévost.

“Good evening, Mademoiselle Geneviève,” said he respectfully. “You are just returned from church, I see. I was going out this way, up the steep path, because I have some one to see on the Place de l’Eglise, and it is much nearer ;” and he went towards the gate in the wall.

Raoul had the key in his pocket. He had shut it and locked it on the inside. What was to be done? Vévette’s confusion was luckily somewhat concealed by her large, overhanging straw hat, and Monsieur Richard was never supposed to be very sharp. She stammered something about the key being lost, and in fact said at last that she had lost it, and was afraid she should be scolded. “It is no matter at all,” replied

blandly Monsieur Richard, "we can go round. But I thought you always went that way. I thought you came just now from that gate into the Pavilion."

"I had come all the way round, but had some seeds I wanted to look for in the garden-house," she answered, trembling with fear.

"Oh! I beg your pardon a thousand times," said Monsieur Richard humbly. "I am afraid I have disturbed you."

They went back together towards the Château, and Vévette let Monsieur Richard out by another gate, and then went into the house herself, calm externally, but internally convulsed with dread.

Had Monsieur Richard seen anything, or heard voices? What did he guess? What did he know?

That evening the sisters went together to the church, and close behind the sacristy-door Vévette perceived Raoul. When they went out, Vévette followed Félicie. "All is safe," whispered a voice in her ear as she passed, and a key was put into her hand under her cloak. Félicie had seen nothing.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE VICOMTE'S TROUBLES.

It was within two days of All-Saints' day, when Monsieur le Vicomte went up just after breakfast-time, to pay a visit to his new friend and protégé, as he thought him.

Madame Jean received him with affability. She had grown gracious in her demeanour towards the "son of the crusaders;" for, in the first place, the tragical death of her old master had considerably softened her, and in the next she relented

towards these *ci-devants*,—useless and obstructive as they seemed to her,—because their conduct to her young master touched her.

She shook her head, with a sigh, in answer to Monsieur de Vérancour's inquiries at the door. "Ah!" said she, "we are none of us the same since then. We shall be a long while before we get over it; and as for poor Monsieur Richard, he really ought to be persuaded to go away for a short time. He never was strong, but he is wasting away now. He ought to change the air. He wants change of scene, change of everything. He's in a bad way." And with another mournful shake of the head, she ushered the Vicomte into Monsieur Richard's presence.

It was not the room that had formerly

been old Prévost's, nor even that immediately under it, which his nephew had been used to inhabit. It was the *salon de compagnie*, as provincials term it, which Monsieur Richard had caused to be arranged as a kind of study, and out of which he rarely went.

When the Vicomte entered, Richard Prévost came forward, eagerly, to meet him, and when they were seated he began the conversation. "Has the shooting been satisfactory?" he asked. "I have done my best, and have told the garde at the Grande Ferme to keep a sharp look-out; but it is hard in these parts not to share one's game with all the ne'er-do-wells of the department."

"Well, yesterday I tried the woods up there," rejoined Monsieur de Vérancour,

pointing in the direction of the hill behind the town. "In the way of hares and chevreuils there's something to be done certainly."

"Ah!" remarked Richard; "in the high timber? yes; and if I dared put old Prosper Morel at your orders, you might have excellent sport. Never was there such a traqueur as that man in the world. But then, you see, I daren't trust him with a gun;—you know he was complained of in my uncle's time;—the instinct is too strong for him. We were obliged even to have his permit taken from him. I daren't give you Prosper."

"Well," answered the Vicomte, in a musing manner, "I saw the poor old fellow yesterday up in the woods yonder, and he looks to me terribly altered. I can't help

thinking those few days' imprisonment, and the examinations and suspicions, and all together, were too much for him. He stares at you in such a strange way, and is more absent than ever. He has quite a moon-struck air."

"Poor man, poor man!" exclaimed Monsieur Richard. "I do not know how to compensate to him for all he went through. In my poor uncle's time he used to be down here every two days, at least; now he scarcely comes at all. Poor old Prosper!"

The conversation dropped, and it was evident that Monsieur le Vicomte had not paid Richard Prévost this matutinal visit merely to converse about the wrongs of the Breton woodcutter. After a pause of a few seconds, he began upon the matter which

was occupying all his mind. "You have perhaps not yet had time to look for the acts I hinted at the other day," said he, in the most propitiatory tone he could assume.

Richard Prévost looked as though he had dropped from the clouds. The Vicomte grew more insinuating still.

"I mean the deeds of transfer your lamented uncle had been so good as to prepare," added he, with a smile wherein the deepest sympathy was meant to be allied to the most gracious condescension. "Alas ! the papers were all to have been signed on the very day on which——" And here Monsieur de Vérancour cut his narration short with an appropriate shudder.

"I remember now," replied Richard. "You allude to the papers concerning the

sale of Les Grandes Bruyères.” The Vicomte nodded assent. “I must beg for forgiveness; but I have only once had the courage to go up there again,—into that dreadful room. I have only once looked into my poor uncle’s papers, and I found nothing there.”

“Yes! in truth it must be dreadful;—dreadful!” rejoined Monsieur le Vicomte, whose self-interest was waxing warm, and who hardly knew how to come to his point. “Dreadful! shattering to the nervous system; but we must be men,—my poor Monsieur Richard! —we must be men!”

Monsieur Richard sighed. “My poor dear uncle had agreed, I think you told me, to purchase Les Grandes Bruyères,” he began, with an apparent effort.

“For the sum of seventy thousand francs

paid down," replied Monsieur de Vérancour. "They were to have been paid into my hands on the fourteenth of this month,—on the day of the murder."

Monsieur Richard turned pale, and for a moment closed his eyes. Then languidly, he drawled out the poor excuse which he had to offer. "It must seem deplorably weak to you," he said, "but to enter that room turns me sick. I have tried, and I am not equal to it. You see I have even left what had been my own room since I was a boy. I instinctively fly from all that recalls the horrible, horrible event!" Another pause. "My poor uncle, then, had almost bought the property," he added, half speaking to himself.

"Almost!" echoed Monsieur de Vérancour. "Quite! He had quite bought it.

The formal engagement was taken. It was binding——”

“Not in law,” interrupted Richard meekly.

“Perhaps not ; but in honour,” retorted Vêrancour, becoming desperate.

“Let us say in friendship,” suggested Monsieur Richard. “Can you,—will you confide in me as in my poor uncle, and let me know why the immediate sale of the property was so desirable ?”

The Vicomte hesitated, and probably the “inward man” made a wry face ; but the outward one had to make the best of it, for what else was there to do ? So he told him all.

Monsieur Richard listened with the deepest, most respectful, attention to the story of which it apparently suited him to appear

ignorant; and when the tale was ended, he rubbed his forehead repeatedly with his hand, and seemed a prey to some hopeless perplexity.

“So that if the property is not purchased within a given time,” he began, “there might result a positive inconvenience,—a kind of obstacle,—to the establishment of Mademoiselle Félicie.”

“A kind of obstacle!” echoed the Vicomte; “why, it would be ruin, my dear Monsieur,—ruin to us all; for such a parti as Monsieur de Champmorin is not to be found readily in the provinces.”

Monsieur de Vérancour, like a great many people in his position, became pressing the moment he had ceased to be supercilious and disdainful, and he was on the verge of becoming importunate. Now that

he had been forced into confiding in Monsieur Richard, it did seem to him so tremendous a fact that a daughter of the house of Vêrancour should be placed in a dilemma out of which this low-born, money-lending bourgeois could extricate her, that he thought by the mere statement of the case to overwhelm that individual and secure his services to an unlimited extent.

When the Vicomte made the hurried and vehement admission of his embarrassment, a flush stole over Monsieur Richard's cheek, and a light shot from beneath his eyelids; but he concealed both by his hand, on which he leant.

"I could hardly have believed," he said, slowly, and with an expression of sorrow, "that any event, coming immediately after the dreadful catastrophe which has so

shaken me, could give me such intense pain ; but indeed, Monsieur le Vicomte, your statement makes me miserable beyond words. Do you require me to say that my devotion to your family is without bounds ? Obscure as I am, I may be allowed to express my gratitude. Your kindness to me since my misfortune has made me your slave. I would give my life to serve any of you." The Vicomte looked benignly upon his inferior, and seemed to accept his sacrifice with indulgence. " But," continued Richard Prévost, " it is out of my power to do anything."

" How out of your power ?" retorted the Vicomte, forgetful of everything save his own needs. " Surely you can keep your uncle's engagement ?"

" Perhaps at some later date," replied

Monsieur Richard. “It would pain me too much to say no!—perhaps later;—perhaps when I see clear in my own affairs. You see times are bad just now;—the financial crisis lasts still, and I cannot sell. All the ready money has been carried away, as you know, by the robbery; and I am myself in difficulties, for I am concluding the arrangements for the purchase of the Chateaubréville estate; and,—to you I will avow it,—I do not know how to obtain what is wanted for the first payment, because, as I said before, all securities are so depreciated, that if I sell, I must be a heavy loser. However, later; in a month or two——”

“Good God!” exclaimed the Vicomte, rudely, “in a month or two all will be over! Unless I can get the money within

a fortnight Champmorin will be off! His notary is a sharp fellow, and will soon find out how the land really lies. And once this chance gone, where is Félicie to find a husband? I wish you would tell me!"

"Oh! Monsieur le Vicomte!" answered Richard, bowing low, "it is not for such as me to point out that;—but assuredly so accomplished a young lady, so admirable a person as Mademoiselle Félicie, and of so illustrious a race, can only have to choose."

"Bah!" retorted Monsieur de Vérancour; "no perfections are worth a centime! And in the pit of ignominy into which we have sunk, gold only is powerful. The noblesse deserts itself, the historical names sell themselves to the highest bidders, and take the mothers of their future sons from the gutter, so there be money to be got!"

I tell you Félicie has no chance. She must live to be a beggarly old maid, if she can't marry Champmorin!" And then Monsieur le Vicomte fell to wheedling his opponent, and called him his "dear Monsieur Richard," and expressed his conviction that he would help him out of his difficulties in consideration of the friendship they bore him.

When Monsieur de Vérancour took leave of Richard Prévost the latter had promised to try and borrow the seventy thousand francs, but he laid stress on the word "try," for he said the operation would be difficult.

The Vicomte was no sooner gone than Monsieur Richard opened a drawer in the table near which he was sitting, and drew out a large leather portfolio full of papers. After turning over several of them, he stopped

at one, and looked at it a long while. It was the deed of sale of Les Grandes Bruyères, drawn up by old Martin Prévost.

Monsieur Richard spelt and weighed every word, and then at last took it up and examined it closely. In so doing another sheet of paper adhered to it, and from between the folds a half-open letter dropped upon the ground. When Richard Prévost had sufficiently examined the deed, he replaced it in the portfolio, then stooped, picked up the fallen letter, and was about to replace it too ; but something in it arrested his attention, and he opened and read it ; it was as follows :—

“ MY DEAR MONSIEUR PRÉVOST,

“ I dare not go to you, for fear my father should hear of it and have some sus-

picion, and my father must not know of what I am about to ask. You once told me, when I was only a boy, that if I ever needed help I must apply to you. I do so now. I am in absolute need of the sum of two thousand francs. I have no means of getting it,—and if I do not get it, I no longer care for life! My future, my happiness, everything hangs upon this, to you, so trifling a sum, and a week hence will be too late! Do not let me ask in vain. I have believed in your words, I have relied upon you, I have no other resource. For the sake of the gratitude they say your mother once owed to mine, help me now.

“Yours devotedly,

“*RAOUL DE MORVILLE.*”

Richard grew pale and red alternately, as

he read and re-read this letter, and when he saw the date, the 7th of October, he muttered to himself, "Just a week before the day ! Oh ! my God, my God ! what is this !" and crumpling the letter up in one of his hands, he sank back upon his chair, and leaned his head upon the table before him.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### LESS THAN A SQUIRE.

THE Morvilles belonged to a class more numerous in the west than in any other part of France ;—to the class known under the denomination of *gentillâtres de campagne*. Before the Revolution these people had their use, for from them the lesser Princes of the Blood, such as Messieurs de Condé and Conti, for instance, and the Great Vassals, such as Messieurs de Montmorency, Rohan, and others of that stamp, took the more active part of their house-

holds; and their adventurous spirit, mixed with the daring of the “cadets de famille,” helped, from the battles of the Ligue to those of La Vendée, to give to the armies of France their reputation for recklessness and dash, and to keep up the prestige of “la furia francese,” acquired during the Italian invasions of Charles of Anjou.

So far, then, the pre-revolutionary existence of these small landholders has a motive. But after '89! After '89 it would be hard to find any reason why they should continue to be; yet there they are as distinct as ever from the classes both above and below them; and having in good earnest “neither learnt nor forgotten” anything, they can scarcely be described otherwise than as a nuisance.

What remains of the historical nobility

of France has,—so long as all remembrance of, or reference to history has not been wiped out,—a kind of signification. While a Court and a Government subsist, which require great dignitaries, enormously paid functionaries, men whose business it is to represent the splendour of the country,—diplomats, for instance, whose duty it still is to communicate with foreign Courts after the fashion kept up in those Courts,—while all this yet subsists, the ancient names of France have an obvious *raison d'être*. Besides, in some cases they serve to perpetuate the traditions of elegance, refinement, good-breeding, and really gentlemanly feeling, for which France was once famous. But to what use can possibly be put the families of men who assert that their social position,—that is, their name,—

prevents them from gaining money in commerce or trade, and the extreme smallness of whose means deprives them of even the ordinary education of the middle-class in any other country at the present day? Too poor to live on a footing of equality with those whom they call their equals, too proud to associate with those whom they call "low-born,"—and who despise them,—too idle to learn, and too proud to work, they live on in their uncomfortable homes, and on their narrow resources, virtually cut off from all communication with the great currents of activity or thought, and are, perhaps, in all Europe, the most thoroughly useless class that can be imagined,—the completest representatives of all that was worst in the *Ancien Régime*.

Early in this century there lived, at about

a league's distance from D——, at a small, tumble-down kind of farm called La Morvillière, two brothers, one named René, the other Charles, de Morville. The elder stuck to his "dirty acres," married, had two children,—a girl, who died, and Raoul, whom we have already seen, and who was now twenty-two. The younger, Charles, ran away from home at seventeen, was sought for in vain for several years, had made a sailor of himself, and achieved glory, by dint of hard service, and harder knocks. He was now an admiral, and had recently gained fresh distinction in China.

Although a vast distance lay, in the mind of the Vicomte, between the "Château" and this wretched little lairdship of La Morvillière, and although the "fils des croisés" looked loftily down upon persons

whose ancestors had certainly never been more than squires to crusaders or crusaders' sons, even if they had been that, still, old Morville was a capital shot, not an unpleasant companion, and in the thinly-peopled neighbourhood of D—— he was better than nothing. At all events, he was not a bourgeois! He was not a lawyer or a banker, or an employé, or a savant. He knew nothing, and did nothing! There was always that to say in his favour. So Monsieur le Vicomte consorted with him. The two wives, who were now both dead, became very dear friends, and the two Demoiselles de Vérancour went to the same convent, at Poitiers, with Marie de Morville, for whose schooling at that venerable institution her parents contrived to find just money enough to pay. The girl was deli-

cate, required good living and exercise, and the bad living and seclusion of the convent killed her. She went out like a lamp, and as no one around her could understand why, she was, on the whole, rather blamed than pitied.

Her mother mourned in silence over her loss, and, at the end of a couple of years, died also. Died, not only of grieving, but because in the dull, weakening monotony of an existence carried on under such conditions as those of the Morville family, there are no reserve-forces created. Life is never replenished, and when the particular sources of vitality of one epoch have been drained, there is no general fountain of life from which to borrow the vitality required for a fresh period. There is no transformation of strength, and men and

women, — but, above all, women, — die simply because they have not life enough left in them wherewith to go on living. The clock goes down, and stops.

Madame de Morville and her friend, the Vicomtesse, were no more,—it is the fittest expression for the act of their departing this life,—within a year of each other, and the void left at La Morvillière was never to be filled up. The wife had been, what she so frequently is in France, the pivot upon which everything and everybody turns. In characterising her emphatically as “wife,” I am, perhaps, wrong. One ought rather to say the housekeeper, for that is in reality her function. She rules supreme, and makes it possible, no matter how straitened are the ways and means, for the family to exist without getting into debt, and without

having their embarrassments dragged before the public.

When the mistress of the house was gone, the house at La Morvillière went to wrack and ruin. Old Morville was utterly incapable of either putting or keeping order anywhere, and he flew into perpetual fits of fury at the ever-recurring evidences of disorder. He did not complain of being obliged to live chiefly on cabbage soup, but he stormed at the fact of the cabbage soup being rarely eatable. The pigs were so ill-fed that there was no fat to the bacon, and the historical food of Frenchmen in or about La Vendée came up to table little more than a vast bowlful of greenish water and yellowish grease. In the shooting season there was game, it is true, but old Morville, at sixty, was not so active as he used to be ;

for the house was terribly damp, and he could not afford to warm it, neither could he afford good wine to light up the fires in his own bodily system; and so he grew rheumatic and morose. There was no money to pay for anything, and the D—— tradespeople were eternally clamouring for the payment of their small bills. It was a wretched state of existence, and most wretched did old Morville find it.

As to Raoul, the real misery, however, was for him, who had never yet complained. He attained the age of twenty-two, with comparatively no education at all. But here Nature compensated for all deficiencies. The boy's energies were so rare, his intelligence was so bright, his desire to acquire knowledge so steady and strong, that he managed to scrape together an amount of

information which put him on a par with the other young men about him, whilst the difficulty with which he had acquired it made him infinitely their superior.

The Curé of D—— had taken a deep interest in Raoul from the boy's earliest childhood, and the Curé of D—— was a remarkable man,—remarkable for his profane, as well as theological, learning, for his liberal opinions, and for the uprightness of his character. He taught Raoul all he could teach him,—Latin, history, grammar, and the elements of geometry, and gave him the run of his library, which was an extensive one.

Raoul had had another patron,—a very singular one; and this was no other than Martin Prévost, who had an inexplicable fondness for the lad, and was reported to

have said that if old Morville would or could do nothing for his son, he would help him whenever he required help.

The tradition in and about D—— was, that Madame de Morville had once rendered a great service to old Prévost's mother, when Madame de Morville herself was a young married woman, and Madame Prévost an aged one, within two years of her death. Monsieur le Curé knew all about it, and it was supposed that Martin Prévost did so too. At all events, his liking for Raoul was a fact. Old Morville, so far from feeling kindly towards Martin Prévost, held his inclination for the boy to be a positive piece of presumption, and formally forbade his son ever to associate with Richard Prévost. Admiral de Morville, who was a sensible, practical man, and had rubbed off the crust

of provincial prejudice, if it ever adhered to him, in his rough contact with the world, did his utmost whenever he came to La Morvillière to atone for his brother's susceptibilities and stupid mistakes, and he never failed to call upon Martin Prévost once or twice during his stay in the neighbourhood, and invariably took his nephew with him on these occasions.

But since the return of the two sisters from their convent at Poitiers, the one attraction for Raoul de Morville in D—— was the Château. The pretext was a ready one. Raoul had been devotedly attached to his dead sister. There was but one year between the two, and he was sixteen when Marie died. He himself was wont to say he should never be consoled for her loss, and that it had been a heavier blow to him even

than the death of his mother. Félicie de Vérancour was reputed to have been Marie de Morville's chosen friend, though Marie herself had seemed to have a yearning love towards little Vévette, who was but a child, and called the elder schoolfellow invariably her "petite maman."

How it all came about, who shall say? And, first, what was it? Raoul and Vévette glided into a perfect unity of heart and soul, into an identity of being, as a boat on an unknown river glides down into a whirlpool, without knowing it. They knew only of their happiness; they did not know of their love, till the fact stood revealed to them that their love was misery. Then it was too late.

No one in the Vérancour household had heeded Raoul. He had not a sou!—he was

sans conséquence. Not quite so completely sans conséquence as Monsieur Richard, because Raoul was a gentleman, after all, but he was "beyond the pale" because of his poverty. His remarkable good looks, his winning ways, his intelligence, his fiery energy,—all went for nothing. It was totally impossible a "man without a sou" should be dangerous to a "well-born woman," and so no one ever adverted to the possible danger of Raoul for Vévette. As to old Morville, he never thought of his son at all, till his brother the Admiral came down to La Morvillière one day, and signified that "something" must be done for Raoul.

"Something ! but what ?" grumbled the father.

"I will take care of that," replied the

Admiral, and then propounded the famous scheme for the clerkship in the Admiralty.

This happened about the end of September, and at first there seemed small chance of the Admiral's project ever coming to maturity. Not only did old Morville object to his son becoming an employé, but Raoul himself respectfully, but firmly, refused to consent until he should have reflected amply upon the obligations of the career opened to him. Old Morville was a fool, and his brother was neither astonished at, nor did he care much for, his refusal; but Raoul,—what made him hesitate? That the Admiral could not fathom, and, after all, as his nephew only asked for time, he gave it him, and waited. In the first days of October the Admiral returned to Paris, and it was settled that Raoul should write to

him when he had made up his mind, and that he should have till the end of the month to do so.

The one thing to which Raoul de Morville did make up his mind was, that Vévette should one day be his wife. But what were the means by which to achieve this end?

## CHAPTER IX.

### MONSIEUR LÉON.

THE great evil of that in France which is not town is, that neither is it country. All real grandeur is one, and the surging and seething and moaning and toiling of the human waves in a huge city's ocean are as terrible a sight as the upheaving of the Atlantic in a storm. Nor is the man who stands alone upon the loneliest shore more lonely than he who seeks solitude in the rush and roar of human passions in a great town. Life stirs the depths of both those

seas, and both are full of sublime poetry ;— but there is no poetry in a pond, and no life in a canal, for neither has any depths to be stirred. What is non-Parisian in France is not rural or agricultural, it is narrowly provincial. On a narrow, shallow scale, an imitation is sought to be produced of a gigantic model, and, like all imitations, it is a failure. It is truly as a pond to a sea, and as no real ground-swells move it, and as no real storm-winds lash it, it is, as a pond, lifeless, and it stagnates. Nothing but disease is to be gained by living always on the banks of a pond, and thus it is that the true provincial in France breathes only the odours of stagnation, or if he mistakes for life and activity his own attempts to ruffle the waters, he merely succeeds in stirring up mud.

It is a dreary and unwholesome existence this of small provincial towns in France. Devoid of all that elevates, it detaches man from himself;—flinging him, as it were, away into some vast interest or cause, and pinning him down to all his lower wants and instincts, paralysing his mind, drying up his heart; and,—far from guarding him from vice,—only making vice itself worse by making it more matter of fact.

If the little town of D—— had had all its houses unroofed, and their secrets laid bare by a “diable boiteux,” you would have shuddered to find how much more degraded the human species was there than in the larger centre of the capital itself; for you would have found all the levels much lower, and all the sins of sensuality and

greed utterly unbalanced by any generous instincts or lofty aspirations.

As the collective efforts of the population of D—— tended persistently towards the fashioning of that small place upon the approved plan of a Grande Ville, you would, had you lived there, have found a miniature copy of all the faults and absurdities of bigger cities.

There were people who did not visit other people, but who, all the same, kept a close watch over the proceedings of those other persons whom they could not visit ! There was intrigue and hypocrisy and dishonesty and cunning enough to furnish the amount desired by the most despotic Court or Government in Europe a hundred years ago ; a perpetual craving for “place,” though there was no place higher than

the dignity of Maire or Conseiller Municipal ;—and a considerable sprinkling of adultery.

D——, in this its transition state of progress towards the morals and manners of a great town, had its “lion,”—a real indigenous lion, or, as the French term it, a “coq de village.” This was no other than a certain Monsieur Duprez, a man of some six or seven-and-thirty, whose father had, twenty years before, been the medical practitioner of the place, and who was, by the public voice of D——, declared to have “made his fortune.” Monsieur Duprez was what ladies'-maids term a wonderfully fine man. He had bushy whiskers and red lips, curly hair and a white forehead, and there was about him a certain air of ease and good nature and jollity which drew towards him

many who, “*de parti pris*,” had decided to keep aloof from him. The deceased doctor had left his son a goodly house in the principal street of D——, and, instead of selling it, the said son jauntily opined that he was rich enough to keep it, and that it was pleasant to have a home in the spot where he was born, and where, as he was graciously pleased to observe, he loved every one and every one loved him. And so Monsieur Léon used to come often to his paternal mansion, and stay there for a few weeks at a time, and it was rumoured that a strong attraction was exercised over him by the wife of the Juge de Paix. This lady, though his senior, and now past forty, was still undeniably handsome, and people asserted that he could not loosen the chain with which she had bound him. However,

be that as it may, Monsieur Duprez came very often to D——, sent down showy articles of furniture from Paris, gave dinners now and then to the “authorities !” played billiards with the whole town, beating everybody, and at the café on the Market Place, opposite the Mairie, was the life and soul of the daily gatherings, and initiated all D—— into the deepest mysteries of politics and finance throughout Europe. What had set the crown to this gentleman’s popularity was, that, about a year before the period we are speaking of, he had sent a tolerable-looking horse, and what he styled a Tilbury, down to his house, and when he was present he drove himself out in this vehicle, and when he was absent he lent it to the Juge de Paix, who drove out his wife. This the people of D—— called an

equipage, and the position of Monsieur Léon became a solid one.

One man alone would never consent to have anything to do with Monsieur Duprez, and that man was old Martin Prévost. He resisted all that amiable person's repeated attempts to captivate him, and when any of their neighbours affirmed that Monsieur Léon had made his fortune, and was a rich man, he invariably answered, "That is what we shall see some day."

Unfortunately, in the life of such small towns as D—— the attraction hardly ever eluded is the café. Business and idleness lead to it alike. Either it is the natural place of appointment for those who have affairs on hand, or it is the natural place for those to lounge in who have no employment for their hours. And so, from the

notary or avoué down to the labourer, and from the petty tradesman up to the neighbouring squire, you are pretty certain to see the entire male population of a small town and its environs send its members successively to the café,—above all, if there be but one.

Martin Prévost and his nephew, though so dissimilar in all their ways, were alike in this, that neither ever set foot in the café; and that was what could be said of no other individual in D——.

M. de Vérancour, on the other hand, would occasionally stroll in, and gratify himself with a “demi-tasse,” or it might be a “choppe,” according to the season or the time of the day at which his visit was paid. Within the last twelvemonths Raoul de Morville had taken to frequenting

the café regularly; and, above all, when Monsieur Duprez was at D—— he would pass hour after hour playing billiards, or talking with “Monsieur Léon,” as he was familiarly called.

Raoul's age, disposition, and peculiar circumstances, all combined to make him the easy dupe of a man like Duprez. Public opinion,—and no matter how small the field, a few hundred men soon constitute a public, and force those who live with them to accept the fact,—public opinion proclaimed Monsieur Léon successful. Here was his power over Raoul. Success was necessarily young Morville's idol, for to succeed was to win Vévette.

But succeed in what? What was the particular career in which Raoul wished to succeed, or for which he was fitted?

That point remained vague and undetermined in his mind, but Monsieur Léon and his "success" fascinated him. Now, those two words "réussir" and "parvenir," which have within the last fifteen years in France risen to such a terrible importance, and which, be it observed, never are associated with any distinct object,—it is never said in what a man has succeeded, or to what he is parvenu,—those two words simply mean the sudden acquirement of wealth by a lucky chance. They imply neither genius, toil, nor patience; they merely imply that, by some piece of good luck, the individual in question has acquired wealth before he was too old to enjoy it. They make the successful man interesting, because fate is supposed to have decided in his favour.

Day after day then Raoul thought more highly of Monsieur Duprez, and set all his energies to discovering how he, too, could compel fortune without loss of time. It was not that he disliked work, but that he was impatient; he would have toiled night and day for his end, but he longed for Vévette. And so he came to question his new friend about his Golden Fleece expeditions, and Monsieur Duprez smiled and said nothing was so easy, and that really if men were not wealthy now-a-days it was that they did not care to be so. And then he invariably wound up his speech with, "Look at me; when I went to Paris ten years ago, I had but a thousand francs in my pocket. I could not sell the house here, therefore it was a dead weight. I had one thousand francs ready money,—

and look at me now !” And at these words Monsieur Léon was wont to indulge in a look and gesture that seemed to say he could buy all D—— if he chose : barring old Prévost, that was the interpretation all D—— gave to the words.

Ten years ! yes ; but ten years was an eternity. Raoul could not wait ten years. Why, he should be thirty-two and Vévette twenty-seven. “Ten years, what an age !”

“Money is made quicker now,” would reply Monsieur Léon. “With ten thousand francs in hand a man who knows what he is about may make a hundred thousand in six months and a million in a year.”

What Aladdin’s lamp-like visions ! But where on earth were the ten thousand

francs to be got that were to be the key to them all?

By dint of listening to Monsieur Léon, however, young Morville's head got filled with ideas of the possibilities of riches; and one day, about the middle of September, Monsieur Léon imparted to his eager disciple his plans for the working of a silver mine in Mexico, and proved, to the latter's entire satisfaction, that the man who should invest two thousand francs, no more, in that incomparable scheme, would inevitably realise fifty per cent. upon his venture; for under the seal of absolute secrecy, Monsieur Léon mentioned the names of great chiefs upon the Bourse who were resolved to drive up the shares to fabulous premiums the moment the prospectus of the company appeared. Then, too, there

was no saying what the future might not bring forth,—a young, active, energetic man would be required to undertake the journey to Mexico, and report on the progress of the works. It might be a journey of some danger, but the remuneration would be princely, and on his return home what might not the successful emissary aspire to !

“Only,” Monsieur Duprez would prudently add, “the repute of the enterprise is so high amongst the few who know of it that it would be probably impossible to secure twenty shares now.”

Monsieur Léon, however, had taken a sincere liking for Raoul. The young fellow’s intelligence and ardour pleased him ; he delighted in his ambition, and would go all lengths to serve him.

“But, my dear friend,” objected he one day, “what is the use of talking in this way of shares, and silver mines, and premiums, and Mexican companies? Where, in the name of Heaven, could you get two thousand francs? Supposing that by any effort I could get you the twenty shares, could you by any witchcraft get the money?”

“Who knows?” had been Raoul’s reply. “Perhaps I might find means.”

This was just the period when Admiral de Morville having proposed the clerkship in the Marine Ministry to his nephew, consented to give the latter time to consider whether he accepted or not.

In the first days of October Monsieur Duprez’s importance rose immensely in the public mind of D——, for he was ob-

served to receive telegrams incessantly, sometimes two in the same day. D—— was not a telegraph station, and a man on horseback had to bring the despatches from Chôlet, an hour's ride, and his arrival was an event, and shed glory over the receiver of the missives, who was forthwith elevated to the rank of a Mirès or a Péreire.

On the 6th of the month, Monsieur Léon announced to Raoul that he could secure the shares, and that he might have one week wherein to find the money. "But," added he, "after the fifteenth it will be too late; for on the afternoon of that day I must start for Paris to undertake the settlement of various preliminary details with my friends."

Had Raoul de Morville in all his surroundings any one who cared to note the

changes in his humour or his countenance, they might have marked his visible anxiety during that week. But there were none who thus cared, and during those few days he never went near the Château.

On the afternoon of the 14th of October Raoul called on Monsieur Duprez, and deposited in his hands two bank-notes of one thousand francs each. And his financial patron slapped him on the shoulder, and said his fortune was made.

Monsieur Léon left for Paris the next day, convinced in his own mind that the money came to Raoul from his uncle, for on that same morning the postman had carried to La Morvillière a registered letter with the Paris postmark. These little details are public property in places like D —, and the successful parvenu had

made up his mind as to what was in that registered letter.

“Goes halves with the nephew in his prospects of gain,” muttered he to himself.

“Vieux loup de mer, va !”

## CHAPTER X.

### THE FEAST FOR THE DEAD.

I HAVE already said that the Curé of D—— was a remarkable man. His great superiority lay in that he was so upright in mind and so largely, unmistakably human. The great fault of all ecclesiastics, whether belonging to the Church of Rome or to other confessions, is that they confine themselves narrowly within their establishments, and ceasing to be men, become churchmen. This was precisely what the Curé of D—— did not do. He was a man among his

fellow-men, feeling for them and with them, and never preaching at, or condemning, or denouncing and renouncing them, but simply striving to understand them. Neither, strong in his own faith as he was, did he ever take upon himself to help the Almighty in his work of awakening faith in others, but waited till God's grace touched them; waited prayerfully and trustfully, but could not be brought to recognise the duty of knocking and driving faith into people by sledge-hammer threats of damnation.

The Curé of D—— had nothing about him of the conventional Apostolic type. Nobody among his parishioners, neither the old women nor the very young ones, ever called him either an angel or a saint, but every one respected him, and all were ready to declare that he was the most thoroughly

honest man that ever breathed. He was ugly and awkward, being large jointed, stout, and ungainly in his movements, and having a big round head, with a large flat face. Yet the kind, truthful expression of his ox-like grey eyes invited confidence and inspired courage. Downhearted people always went to him and came away cheered. He was of a singularly undaunted nature, loved all men, and feared nothing. When a misfortune happened to an unbeliever he was by that unbeliever's side an hour after, giving him the practical help he needed, and invariably saying that good Christians wanted him far less than bad ones. It was notorious that when Père Vincent's cow died, and left him ruined, Monsieur le Curé gave him the means of buying another out of his own purse ; and as Père

Vincent was an infidel and a scoffer and the son of a father who had in '93 massacred priests, this fact scandalised the bishops; but it caused Père Vincent to have himself baptised within the year, and to bow his head meekly before the gentle force of the Gospel. It was also notorious that in June, '48, when Monsieur le Maire, terrified almost into insanity, was nowhere to be found, the Curé had assumed his place, and distributing cartouches to the Garde Nationale and sturdy counsel to each individual man, had organised and kept up such a respectable system of defence for the little town of D——, that the various insurrectionary bands that swept through the department agreed to leave D—— unvisited, and avowed later that they were afraid of the Curé.

Well ! it is true ; that was a thing often said of our friend. Many people pretended they were afraid of him ; but those who did so were always found to be half-and-half natures, faint souls, who quailed less before darkness than before light.

Between old Prévost and the Curé there had been a sort of tacit compromise, somewhat after the fashion of that which exists in France between the Church and the State ; each, at bottom, regarding the other as a necessary evil. The Curé couldn't, for the life of him, esteem Martin Prévost, for he was far too sure of the latter's usurious exactions ; and his charity and his honesty had bouts of hard fighting with each other over the grandson of the Swiss valet de chambre ;—for, let it be avowed, the Curé was, of the two, more honest even than charitable.

This it was which made Martin Prévost respect him. A Voltairian himself, if he had had to do with a priest who was only a priest, let what might have been his virtues, he would have got the better of him, and made his life intolerable in D——; but the Curé met him on his own ground, and, if they had tried conclusions, would have beaten him on it, and this Martin Prévost felt, and avoided all collision with him. If the Curé stated that money must be given for some practical purpose, old Prévost gave his share without murmuring, and what was more, Madame Jean contributed hers too; for the Curé never went about begging, and never got up “quêtes” for sentimental objects.

When Martin Prévost came to his violent end, the Curé was, as he invariably proved

to be upon all emergencies, the most useful person in D——. He inspired the Maire with courage, and the Juge de Paix with good sense, and persuaded the Juge d'Instruction, who was sent from the chef-lieu du département, to refrain from committing daily acts of arbitrary folly. If it had not been for the Curé the whole town would have been preventively imprisoned, and at the same time, if it had not been for him, the scanty traces of the direction taken by the murderer would not have been discovered. To Monsieur Richard the Curé had shown every imaginable kindness, going even the length of offering him a room at the Presbytère, if the residence in his crime-polluted, blood-stained home proved too much for him.

“C'est un fier homme que Monsieur le

Curé ?"—so proclaimed Madame Jean, who in no way partook of her defunct master's Voltairianism ; preferring, however, for her own spiritual needs, the mild humdrum, gossiping, guidance of the Vicaire to the rough-handed thorough direction of his superior.

All Saints' Day had come and was past, and a finer first of November had rarely been witnessed. The sun was bright and warm, and the sky blue as in May, and all D—— had been present at High Mass, and all the womankind of D—— had attended vespers.

The church clock struck six, night was beginning to close in, and the vigils for the feast of the dead, the solemn fête of the next day, were ended. The Curé gave a last look round the sacristy to see that all was in order ; he had already allowed the Vicaire

and the sacristan to go to their respective homes ; and then taking in hand an enormous key which hung with three or four others to a ponderous iron ring, he prepared to put it into the lock of the so-called choir-door, and lock from the outside the entrance which was opposite to the Presbytère. Just as the key grated in the ward he heard a voice speaking to him. “Don’t shut me up, please,” said the sweet, girlish voice, and a slight form, clothed in black, brushed past the Curé and crossed the threshold.

“You, my child ?” exclaimed he on recognising Vévette. “Why, I didn’t see you in church. I thought you had gone to St. Philibert.”

“No ; I did not ; Félicie did. You know I always come here.” These last words were said in a subdued tone and contained

an allusion to what was rather a sore point between the Curé and the Château.

In former days the Château had had two parishes; the upper or eastern parts of the estate lying within the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical authorities of D——, while the lands to the west belonged to the parish of St. Philibert. The Canon Law of France prescribing that High Mass on Sundays and feast days shall be attended by every parishioner at the church of his parish, the Vêrancour family had seemingly no choice now save to go into the town for the exercise of their religious duties; but the little hamlet of St. Philibert had attractions for Mademoiselle Félicie, and she maintained that she had still a right to regard herself as a parishioner of St. Philibert, and at all events to take the Curé of St. Philibert for

her confessor. Accordingly, the compromise hit upon tacitly by both parties was, that if the inmates of the Château attended all great ceremonies at the town church, they were free to attend all lesser ones at the church, or chapel rather, of the village. Now vespers and vigils are not strictly obligatory, and mass being over, Mademoiselle Félicie had resorted for the afternoon services to the place of worship most agreeable to her, leaving her sister, as was her wont, to hear every note of "les offices" at the church at D——.

"It is late for you to be out alone, my child," said the Curé, as he turned the heavy key in the rusty lock of the door.

"I am not alone," answered Vévette. "Mère Jubine's Louison is with me," and she pointed to the tall figure of a girl who

was standing at a few yards from them, close to the trunk of a sycamore.

By the dim rays of the lantern that he carried in his hand you could see an expression of displeasure pass over the rugged features of the Curé. "She is not a fitting person to accompany you," observed he in a loud whisper.

"Oh ! Monsieur le Curé," rejoined Vévette, half reproachfully, "you must not be hard upon her ; she is really a very good girl ; and, besides, if she had not promised to come back with me, I could not have come at all."

"No ! of course not," retorted he, "so long as Mademoiselle Félicie indulges in particular fancies for this or that chapel, or this or that minister of God."

"Ah ! Monsieur le Curé," interrupted

Vévette, “now you are hard upon Félicie.”

“I hope I am not hard upon any one,” said the Curé; “but I am anxious to see the worship of the Almighty kept pure from all unworthy personal considerations; and, for instance, my child, I do hope that if death,—or the Bishop,—should remove me from D——, you will be to my successor, as your parish priest, all you have been to me, even should he happen to be the reverse of whatever you may choose to think pleasant or agreeable. Where are we tending?” he added, after a moment’s pause, and walking on a step or two, “with all these littlenesses, and caprices, and hypocrisies? The love of God and the fear of God are disappearing from human hearts, and in their place we have new-fangled practices, pet-prayers, and

medals ! Medals !” he repeated in a singular tone of deprecation. “Forms ! forms ! imitation piety !”

Vévette smiled, and said with a touch of raillery in her sweet voice, “Well ! what you say is always the exact reverse of what the Abbé Leroy says.” The Curé of St. Philibert usually went by his own name, whilst the parish priest of D—— was emphatically “Monsieur le Curé” for ten miles round. “The Abbé Leroy insists upon it that we can never bind ourselves down by too many forms.”

“The Abbé Leroy is a Jesuit,” broke in the Curé, abruptly. “They don’t know where they are leading the Church, nor how they are falsifying her teachings. However, faith and prayer are our only arms ;—and hard work,” he added ; “the incessant labour

to bring all our brethren to see the truth, and love it. My poor little lamb ! don't let yourself be be-medalled. Love God, and strive beyond your strength to act uprightly and honestly ; to do what is right. All the medals in the world won't help you as much as that will."

Thus saying, they reached the threshold of the Presbytère, the door of which was opened by a stern-featured woman, long past the canonic age,\* and familiar to D—— as "Monsieur le Curé's Lise."

"I've been drawn into preaching," observed the Curé, with a shake of the head ; "a dangerous habit !—leads to intolerance, and to judging one's neighbours. Here, dear child, take this box of dra-

\* No priest is allowed in France to be served by a woman under forty.

gées ; \* they come from the christening of this morning ;—Pierre Champion's little girl, you know ; ”—and he tendered to Vévette a round box which he extracted from the deep pockets of his wide soutane.

“ Nay,” objected Vévette, “ not all,—give me half.”

“ Give the other half to Mademoiselle Félicie from me ; in her peculiar parlance she will tell you she adores dragées,”—the Curé made a wry face as he uttered the words ; “ and make haste home now, for look at those masses of cloud to the west ; we shall have rain in no time ; and just feel how cold the wind has grown. All our fine days are over.”

\* The poorest person, upon the occasion of a christening, presents the officiating priest with a box of dragées (sugared almonds).

Vévette hurried down the steep path with her companion, not knowing why the Curé's parting words had struck her with a sudden chill. It seemed to her as though all her fine days were at an end.

And sure enough the weather did change, and wind and rain howled and pelted all the night, and the morning rose upon as gloomy a "jour des morts" as any inhabitant of D—— cared to remember. At a little after nine the tolling of the church bell apprised the population that mass for the souls of the dead would soon be chanted, and from almost every house or shop-door you saw individuals of both sexes and all ages issuing; for whatever the religious opinions of Frenchmen or women, this is a fête from which they are rarely absent. The bell tolled on for more than half an hour, till, at

ten o'clock, it ceased, marking the moment when High Mass began.

The church of D—— was, like many of those in the west of France, built at various periods ; destroyed during the barbarous wars of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries,—for which destruction we English had a good deal to answer,—and re-constructed according to the style of the epoch following those troubles. It had a crypt, which with a part of the wall at the back of the choir was of the tenth century, the nave was of the fifteenth, and the chief entrance, with its pointed Gothic arch and rich stone carvings, bore the date of 1508. Inside it was very plain, but possessed a few objects of local interest,—one handsome tomb of a princess of the House of Anjou ; another, quite modern, of a distinguished Polish

exile ; and several partially-filled windows of extremely fine old stained-glass. The Revolution had committed great havoc here, and vast spaces of dull lead-coloured panes intervened between the rescued portions of colour, gorgeous as the richest tissues of the East, and quite sufficient, when the sun blazed upon them in midsummer, to throw a carpet of red, blue, and gold upon the stone pavement of the aisles.

There was no brightening ray, however, to enliven the church on this 2nd of November. All was dismal as the occasion itself. The altar was hung with black, and dimly lighted, and in the centre of the nave rose a large, heavy-looking edifice draped in black cloth, covered with silver flames, surmounted with black and white plumes, and surrounded with tall, great

tapers, the yellow wax wherefrom guttered down in the draughts of air that entered through every opening. At a little after nine you began to hear the sharp sound of sabots upon the floor. They came in one by one; the closing door gave a muffled slam, the ring of an umbrella dropping upon the pavement produced a metallic sound, the wooden heels tapped against the stone, a half-drenched, poorly-dressed peasant made his, or her, way up to the wooden benches, and all was again still. Till just before mass was commenced only the very devout were visible, and these were mostly country people,—what in France are called cultivateurs,—and their families. During the procession round the church, there were few of the townsfolk, but all who were present followed the procession, and joined

in the ghostly chants which the ritual of Rome prescribes for this part of the ceremony. One of the earliest of these assistants was the woodcutter, Prosper Morel, and though he came the very last in the line following the banner and the priests, he seemed foremost of all in the fervour of spirit with which he joined the ardent invocations of the Church. His coarse, much patched, and darned blouse was wet through, for apparently he had no umbrella, and a broad-brimmed grey hat was crushed between his two horny hands, which he held clasped together on his breast, and in an attitude of agonised entreaty. With head high uplifted, and eyes staring, as it were, through the very roof above him, the uncouth-looking Breton poured forth the ever-recurring "Libera

me" with tremendous force, and in a strangely funereal tone. When the procession was ended, Prosper retired to a vacant corner close to a lateral door right opposite the pulpit, and knelt down upon the pavement, seemingly having no place upon any of the wooden benches.

Somewhat before ten o'clock the real congregation began to pour in, and Monsieur le Maire took his place in the carved oak state-pew in front of the pulpit, where, on worm-eaten old chairs, covered with moth-eaten red velvet, the notables and worthies of the parish were entitled to sit. M. de Vérancour and Richard Prévost, by reason of their importance in the parochial administration, sat there also. In the centre of the church were ranged the various heads of the society of D——, chiefly remark-

able from the different degrees of richness of their respective *prie-dieus*. There were the doctor and his mother, wife, and children, and the notary with his wife, and the schoolmaster, and the hotel-keeper, and the Juge de Paix, with his wife and a lanky boy. The Juge de Paix, who was a “*philosophe*,” was remarkable for never kneeling; he went to church because that was fitting in his position, but he stood when others knelt, and thought that this conciliated personal independence with respect for the forms honoured by the State.

When the Curé mounted the altar-steps and began to recite the “*Introito*,” there was not a person of any note in the town absent from the church. Madame Jean, in very handsome mourning, had, on the whole, the finest *prie-dieu* of all,—tapestry-work,

red poppies, blue corn-flowers, and a white cross in the middle. The brigadier de gendarmerie was splendidly got up.

When the terrible chant of the “*Dies Iræ*” wailed and moaned through the church, many a head was bowed down, and although nothing could exceed the discordance of the sounds on which the awful words were borne, and although the drone of the serpent, out of tune and out of time, and confided to the musical aptitudes of a fanatical cobbler, verged upon the ridiculous, nothing seemed felt but the dread of the future and the grief for the lost. Poor little Vévette was observed to sob bitterly as she hid her head in her handkerchief, and both old Morville and his son Raoul covered their faces with their hats. Richard Prévost was pale, and

looked ill, and old Prosper, still on his knees in his corner, was intent upon his large-beaded rosary, and mumbled over it like one of the cripples in his own province on his way to a "pardon."

When the Gospel had been read, the Curé ascended the pulpit, and, as it is the custom in country churches, prepared to address a few words to his hearers upon the special import of the day's service.

The Curé was no orator, and he knew it, and never attempted to make elaborate discourses, which, had they been the finest in the world, would have been lost upon his hearers. His sermons were generally short and to the point, and merely aimed at impressing his auditory with the reality and comprehensibility of the Christian doctrine, and at bringing home to their minds

the true sense of whatever might be the particular lesson of the day.

His subject on this 2nd of November was already found;—it was death. Few among us who have passed their childhood do not respond to the melancholy of that theme! And so the congregation of the church of D—— listened to the Curé's homely words with rapt attention, and dwelt anew in anguish upon the beloved who were for ever gone.

“For ever!” There was the mystery—the terror or the hope; and there, of course, the priest, full of faith, strove to bring over every individual listener to grasp, as it were, with his hand the reasons for believing. Stifled sobs and low wailings answered his appeal, and no eloquence was needed to touch even the most rugged hearts on this

one point where all had suffered. The howling of the wind without, and the plashing of the rain, made a gloomy accompaniment to the scene.

When his short address was nearly ended, the Curé paused, and then in a few sentences adverted to the horrible crime by which the hitherto peaceful town had been affrighted,—the murder of Martin Prévost. “We have not only felt the grief and the sorrow of death,” said he, “but the terror of death has visited us;—death in its most dreadful form, the form of murder! And the murderer is unpunished, unsuspected!”

And then, leaning forwards upon the cushion in front of the pulpit, and speaking more slowly than before, he thus continued his discourse:—“I would wish you all,” said he with extreme earnestness, “to study

the last words of to-day's Gospel, for you will see how they apply to the terrible mystery which so shocks us all." Placing his finger upon the page of the book open before him—"Listen!" he added; "'For the hour will come in which all who are in their tombs will hear the voice of the Son of God. And those who have acted righteously will arise, and theirs shall be the resurrection to life; and those who have done evil will also arise, but only to be judged.' Now, my brethren, these are not vain words; these are facts. It is good you should look upon them as such. We are regretful at this moment that the evil-doer should have escaped, for his escape might have called down wrong and misery upon the innocent, and it is God's mercy alone which has allowed it to be clearly

proved that among our neighbours stands no murderer : but, my brethren, the evil-doer has not escaped ; it is but a reprieve ;—it is only for a few months, or weeks, or days. He cannot escape, my brethren ; no one can escape ; for when that hour of which we are told strikes, the murderer will rise, but by his side, will be the man he murdered ! Perhaps even now he is trying to forget, perhaps he has forgotten ; but the hour will come,—come as surely as that I am standing here,—and when he gets out of his grave he will see over again what he hoped never to see more. He will see the blood-stained head and face ; and the eyes, whose death-glare he did not see, will stare at him, and Martin Prévost will clutch his hand and lead him up to the eternal tribunal. They will stand there together face to face.”

These words, whereby the Curé had merely intended to impress on his hearers the certainty of retribution, and the matter-of-fact truth of Gospel teachings, seemed to have struck a strange terror into the entire congregation. The remainder of mass was attended to in silence, and the departing crowd exchanged silent greetings on the threshold of the church. The wind still howled pitifully, and the rain beat against the windows, and the lowering grey sky looked like a pall.

When the last parishioner had departed, Raoul de Morville left his father's side and went back into the church to fetch the prayer-book he had mislaid upon his chair. "Why, Prosper, what's the matter?" he exclaimed, as, on turning round to go out by the side-door, he saw the woodcutter still

on his knees, with his rosary in his hand, but motionless. The man's head was thrown back, and rested upon the stone carvings of the holy-water font ; his eyes were wide open, and so was his mouth ; but nor look nor breath nor sound came from either. His fingers were closed tightly over his beads. He was apparently in a trance or a fit.

Raoul shook him, and threw water from the font over him, but he was some minutes before he recalled him to himself. When consciousness did return, he shrank from Raoul as from a reptile, gathered himself up, and, quivering with fear, fixed his dull, scared look upon Raoul with an expression of horror quite indescribable.

The beadle came by to see that no one lingered in the church, and young Morville recommended the Breton to his care.

In the end Prosper consented to rise and make his way out of the church, but he went alone, fiercely resenting any attempts to lead him out with an inarticulate groan, and with a look that at once was full of hatred and terror. The beadle shrugged his shoulders. "The old fellow's head never was good for much," he mumbled; "and what with the murder and his own imprisonment, it's all topsy-turvy now,—il a déménagé, pauvre bonhomme!" and the beadle tapped his forehead with his fat forefinger.

## CHAPTER XI.

### MADemoiselle FÉLICIE'S HUSBAND.

THE "fortnight" which Monsieur de Vérancour had begged from De Champmorin's notary was past, and another week added to it, and still there was no news of the money, and the suspense endured by the unfortunate Vicomte was becoming intolerable; and various slight signs were here and there appearing of Mademoiselle Félicie's matrimonial defeat being likely to stand revealed to the general public. It was really beyond bearing! And the worst

of it was, that it was impossible not to be grateful to poor, good, patiently-toiling Monsieur Richard for the manifest trouble he was taking. He never totally deprived the sorely perplexed father of hope, never announced to him the failure of his negotiations, or put himself in the position of a man who had done his utmost and could do no more; but, on the contrary, played with his solicitor after the most tantalising fashion, and was for ever showing him a chance of the attainment of their ends. Their ends!—for of his zeal in the cause of the family, Monsieur Richard left no doubt. And the Vicomte felt it was the “family,” the house of Vêrancour, which was being served;—and that was as it should be. It would have been presumptuous in Monsieur Richard to have tried

to render a service to the Vicomte, out of personal friendship; whereas, besides being convenient, it was creditable to a man like Richard Prévost to wish so ardently to serve the interests of an illustrious race. And from the point of view of “*ma maison*,” as Monsieur le Vicomte would perpetually repeat to himself, it was gratifying to observe the plebeian’s devotion, while it did away with the necessity for any personal gratitude, which was also pleasing.

Such was Monsieur Richard’s desire to obtain for his noble patron the sum required for the establishment of Mademoiselle Félicie, that he was for ever acquainting him with some new plan that his untiring ingenuity had devised, and that must be certain to succeed;—only just in the teeth of this

“certainty,” something of the most impossible kind invariably occurred which dashed all the seemingly so well-founded hopes to the ground. There was only one simple operation that Monsieur Richard never proposed ; and that was to dispose of any securities of his own at a great loss, and bring the proceeds to the Vicomte. No ! it was always a question of “raising” the money from some one else, and in this transaction Monsieur Richard was doomed to perpetual disappointment. As to buying the “Grandes Bruyères,” as his uncle had been ready to do, that was utterly out of the question. Monsieur Richard had no ready money ; everything was absorbed by this purchase of the Châteaubréville estate.

“It is a very heavy responsibility,” said

Monsieur Richard, one evening when he was sitting with the family at the Château, round the smouldering fire, “a very heavy responsibility;” and he sighed, and ventured to take up Vévette’s scissors from the table and examine them attentively.

Monsieur de Vérancour placed his two hands on his knees, bending forwards, and looking intently at the toes of his thick boots. “Well!” rejoined he, with a kind of grunt, “I confess it passes me to make out why you have done it. I should call it a terrible imprudence. To go and saddle yourself with land,—with a very considerable landed property indeed!—when nothing obliges you to do so. I confess that goes beyond me;” and the Vicomte threw himself back in his chair as if he gave the problem up in despair. “That we,” con-

tinued he, after a momentary pause, "should go on impoverishing ourselves to keep up old historic memories, and prevent the glorious sound of old names from being lost in the horrid roar of Revolutions,—that is comprehensible; it is one of the many sacrifices to which our noblesse obliges us. And how many are there of us who can do it, even? Not one in a hundred. We, who are identical with the soil, we are forced to sell it."

"Perhaps," suggested timidly Monsieur Richard, "perhaps that is why we buy it."

But the Vicomte did not seem at all impressed by the force of this argument; for, unheeding the interruption, he continued, "You people of the new school, you nouveaux riches, are so completely free! Nothing trammels or binds you. You

can absolutely do whatever you choose; you have nothing to keep up—no traditions, no names, no ancestors who have a right to expect from you the sacrifice of all mere worldly advantages to the respect for their dignity. We are trammelled, fettered, chained down on all sides, whilst you are free as air. And yet you are always seeking to forge some chain for yourselves. Land, forsooth! land! that it is with which you nouveaux riches are always burdening yourselves.”

“It is possible,” edged in meekly Monsieur Richard, “that we may wish to found something.”

“Found what?” exclaimed the Vicomte, with truly superb disdain. “It takes ages to found an order in the state. Nobody founded us. We were! What was the

use of putting us down? Found, indeed! I should like to know what the men of to-day, the men without names, can found?"

"Not an old nobility, certainly," replied Monsieur Richard gently, and with a smile, "but perhaps a new aristocracy."

"Whew!" half whistled Monsieur de Vérancour, with a supremely contemptuous curl of the lip. "That takes four generations at least, and heaps of money!" And, getting up and standing with his back to the fire, he continued, "Why, now, look at what you're doing. When you've bought and paid for the Châteaubréville property, you'll have to put it in order, and restore the house,—it's shockingly out of repair,—and furnish it."

"There's a great deal of splendid old furniture in it," interrupted Richard Prévost.

“ Yes ; but old—very old,” retorted the Vicomte ; “ out of keeping with the habits of modern——” he seemed at a loss for a proper term. “ of modern——” he hesitated again.

“ You mean out of keeping with the habits of la petite bourgeoisie,” said Richard, coming to his assistance. “ But, Monsieur le Vicomte,” added he, “ I intend to furnish, and I hope keep up Châteaubréville on a scale not quite unfitting the importance of the place.”

“ The deuce you do, my dear fellow. Why, then, you’ll not be able to do it under a hundred thousand francs a year.”

“ I do not count upon doing it for so little,” answered humbly Monsieur Richard.

“ Peste !” ejaculated Monsieur de Vêrancour, and the look which accompanied the

expression seemed to say, "Where have these canaille stolen all this gold?"

A hundred thousand francs of income! Oh, the magic of those few words! Mademoiselle Félicie let her tapestry drop upon her lap, and surveyed poor Monsieur Richard from under her eyelids with such a strange look, but a gracious one decidedly.

"Diable!" pursued the Vicomte. "Well, then, you may make a marriage,—a good marriage; it will be in your power to marry a well-born girl without a fortune."

"If you would help—would guide me," murmured Richard.

"I know of none such," retorted the Vicomte haughtily; "but I know that in Paris, for instance, there are plenty of reduced families who will give their daughters to anybody who is rich. It is quite

a thing of the present day, quite a new thing in France. It has been for nearly two centuries the practice to renovate the lustre of ancient names by marrying the eldest sons of illustrious houses to large fortunes embodied in base-born girls. There you have the “savonnette à vilain” of the Regency and of Louis XV., but it is only recently that nobly-born girls have been sacrificed to become the mothers of shopkeepers. However, so it is now, and certain it is that money can do anything. Therefore, my dear Monsieur Richard, as I said before, if you have a hundred thousand francs a year to spend, I do not see why you should not marry a wife whom the ladies of the province should visit.”

Monsieur Richard bowed low and deferentially, as though he felt the full value

of the announcement made to him, and nothing in his manner indicated that he was other than flattered by the Vicomte's behaviour; for, in truth, the Vicomte meant to be particularly kind, affable, and condescending, patronising, nay,—even paternal.

Mademoiselle Félicie, by reason of the thirty years' difference of age between herself and her father, saw things in a slightly different light, and was just capable of understanding that Monsieur Richard might be anything but flattered by her parent's naïvely contemptuous familiarity; and when their visitor rose to go, she proceeded to a small side-table in the half-lighted drawing-room and asked him if he would not take a glass of *cau sucrée*. Upon his acceptance of that favour, she mixed the

harmless beverage for him herself, tendered it to him, and as she did so, allowed her white hand unconsciously to touch his, lingered for a few seconds ere she relinquished her hold upon the glass, and with a perfectly angelic look asked Monsieur Richard if he were quite sure there was sugar enough in the water.

And then another week went by, and it seemed somehow or other to be becoming known that Mademoiselle Félicie would not marry Monsieur de Champmorin. How it had transpired no one could say; but it was thought to be traceable to the Champmorin notary, who in moments of effusion and confidential talk with trusted friends, had discoursed upon the impossibility of girls marrying without money, and had unguardedly alluded to his client as “much

to be pitied"—insinuating, as it were, that Mademoiselle Félicie,—having been fallen in love with, unprovided as she was with any dot,—could not be held altogether blameless.

Richard Prévost abstained for three days from going near the Château. On the fourth Monsieur de Vérancour sought him. Monsieur Richard was warming himself before a huge, blazing fire in his study, when a loud ring was heard at the door bell, a loud footstep quickly followed it in the hall, and dispensing with Madame Jean's attendance, Monsieur le Vicomte opened the door for himself, and stalked into the room.

"Well, there it is at last!" he exclaimed, throwing himself into a chair and letting his brown felt hat drop on the floor beside him. "I always thought it would

come to this with all these confounded delays; and now there it is! S—— mille tonnerres de Dieu!” And all those good principles which were to keep this “right-thinking” fils des croisés from swearing, flew to the winds, and he indulged in the comfort of a string of oaths, as if he had been no more than one of those long-forgotten Saulnier forefathers of his, picking up salt in the Breton marshes.

“I beseech of you,” entreated Monsieur Richard, rising, “do not give up hope. I have, on the contrary, good news. I should have gone to see you last evening if the weather had not been so bad and my cough troublesome, but I was going down to the Château now. I have a letter from an old friend of my poor uncle’s in Nantes, and I am positively not without hopes that perhaps

even a sale of Les Grandes Bruyères might be possible. Here, I will read you the letter. I got it yesterday." And Monsieur Richard began busily throwing over the letters and papers before him.

"The devil take your letter!" stormed the Vicomte; "what do all the letters in the world matter now? Why Champmorin refuses!" And striding up to the table, Monsieur de Vérancour brought his hand down upon it with a heavy thump, and the two men looked each other in the face.

"Re—fu—ses!" stammered out Richard Prévost. "Oh! Monsieur le Vicomte, I am constrained to say I cannot master the sense of those words. Monsieur de Champmorin refuses the honour of being the husband of Mademoiselle de Vérancour!"

The exasperated parent was somewhat

mollified at sight of Monsieur Richard's indignation. "Read that," said he, handing over to him a letter.

Monsieur Richard did read, and was seemingly overpowered by what he read, for his countenance was thoroughly what his countrymen term "bouleversé" when he returned the paper to its owner.

"You will admit," observed the latter, "that nothing is left for me to do. It is as complete a congé as can well be given, and, moreover, couched in such respectful and mournful terms that probably public opinion would expect me to condole with the writer."

Richard Prévost took the letter back into his hand, pored over it anew, and then replied with an air and in a tone of supreme depression.

“No !” he sighed, as though vanquished by fate, “there is nothing left to do,—nothing !”

Monsieur de Vérancour sprang from his seat, and paced up and down the room. “Nothing !” echoed he, with stentorian lungs ; “that is exactly what drives me mad ! I feel ready to shoot myself because I have no earthly pretext for shooting Champmorin !”

“Good God !” exclaimed Richard Prévost in a tone of downright agony, “to think of such a thing ! A demoiselle de Vérancour refused by a mere country gentleman ! Refused ! Such a person as Mademoiselle Félicie !—such birth and position !—such a name !”

The Vicomte went on pacing up and down and muttering, and Monsieur Richard

went on watching him without being noticed.

“One thing must at all events be seen to,” ejaculated Richard, as though struck by a sudden inspiration. “The whole must be kept secret; it must never be known that——”

“Not known!” thundered the Vicomte. “Well, my good sir, one sees what it is to live out of the world as you do! Why, it is known already. Everybody knows it. It was known before it was true! These things always are!”

“So that,” groaned Monsieur Richard, “it will be public throughout the province that Mademoiselle Félicie—Ma-de-moi-selle Félicie,”—and he dwelt on every syllable solemnly,—“has been given up, discarded, refused! It is too dreadful!” “Can

nothing be done ?” recommenced Monsieur Richard, with a kind of timid eagerness, after a silence of a few moments.

“What ?” rejoined Monsieur de Vérancour.

“Indeed, it is hard to say,” rejoined the other sadly ; “but surely it would be possible to find some remedy. Anything would be preferable to the present position.”

“I should think it would, indeed !” retorted bitterly Monsieur de Vérancour.

“Well, but—” suggested hesitatingly Monsieur Richard, “could no other parti be found ?”

“Where ?” cried the Vicomte. “Do you fancy, my worthy Monsieur Richard, that husbands for discarded young ladies are to be found by beating the woods for them, and that they come as snakes do

when they smell the catcher's pot of boiling milk?\*" No, thank you! No dot, no husband! Where is there one anywhere round? Look through the department. Why, there's not even an old invalid, wanting a nurse,—not even a *mésalliance* to be got!"

Monsieur Richard fell to musing, and the Vicomte went on walking up and down, but he did seem comforted by the talk he was having. "Monsieur le Vicomte," at length said, in a low and unsteady tone, Richard Prévost; "there is a *mésalliance*, if Mademoiselle Félicie would consent to that. I know of one—a very—an extremely rich *parti*."

"The devil you do!" broke in Monsieur

\* In Poitou it is a trade to catch snakes, and the catchers attract them by boiling milk.

de Vérancour, stopping short in his walk.

“Where is he to be found? Who is he?”

Richard Prévost was pale as a ghost, so pale that the edge of his eyelids seemed quite pink, as he looked hesitatingly at his interlocutor. “Well!” exclaimed the latter, “where is he? who is he?”

“It is me, myself!” gasped out Monsieur Richard, under his breath. The stare of blank astonishment with amusement mixed, with which his proposal was met, was not likely to be ever forgotten by the unlucky suitor, whose white face turned scarlet with shame.

“You?” echoed Monsieur de Vérancour. “You?” And then struggling with the strong sense of the ridiculous, “You?” he shouted a third time. The apparent fun of the thing fairly mastered him, and he roared

with laughter, as he threw himself into the nearest chair and held his sides.

The Vicomte's fit of hilarity lasted long enough for Monsieur Richard to determine upon what attitude he should assume. He assumed one of injured dignity, and reminded his hearer, when he was able to attend to him, that he was exceedingly rich, and that his offer was a proof of his devotion to the house of Vêrancour.

Conversation was not easy after this incident, and so the Vicomte soon prepared to take his leave. When he did so, he held out his hand to Monsieur Richard, and spoke again to his young friend with his features not yet quit of the laugh that had convulsed them. "There shall be no rancour about it!" said he, with jovial graciousness. "I am sure you meant it well,

but you know it really was too droll. I ought to apologise for laughing so immoderately, but, on my honour, it was irresistible. However I shan't forget the intention, and I assure you, you have done me good ; it has been quite a distraction." And, with a good-humoured shake of the hand, he left the room and the house, and once in the street, had another laugh to himself.

Whether Monsieur de Vérancour would have altogether liked the look with which Monsieur Richard followed him when his back was turned, is another question.

## CHAPTER XII.

### RAOUL'S DISTRESS.

JUST before the end of October a little incident had occurred which had frightened D—— “from its propriety,” and afforded the old cronies of the place an opportunity for declaring that the end of the world was coming. It had become known that Monsieur Léon Duprez, that most magnificent “cock of the walk,” whose example, said the elders, was so disastrous for the young generation, had sailed for Australia, under a feigned name, thus escaping at once from

his debtors and his admiring townsfolk, from his colleagues on various Boards, and from Madame Josephine Le Vaillant, the wife of the Juge de Paix. Naturally this was “un évènement,” and, what with one thing and another, the little town of D—— did appear to be aping its betters, and losing all right to be denominated a “quiet retreat.”

In the course of time,—that is, towards the first days of November,—what are termed “proceedings” were taken against Monsieur Duprez’s property, and his house and furniture were to be put up for sale; though the reports of what his debts in Paris amounted to made any price that might be reached by the disposal of his paternal estate seem a mere “drop in the ocean.”

All this really was very agitating for the

public mind of D——. Here, in less than a month, had there been a murder, a financial break-up,—or, as the commentators delighted to call it, a “scandal,”—and a matrimonial alliance broken off!

In the midst of such exciting events the fact that Raoul de Morville was going up to Paris to be a clerk in the Marine Ministry, passed unnoticed. And, above all, it entered no one's head that there could be any possible connection between his acceptance of official drudgery in a subordinate position and the ruin of the some-time “cock of the walk” who had been his intimate friend.

Old Morville spoke but little with his neighbours, but to the few whom he met he grunted out the announcement of his son's approaching departure, and received a most humiliating meed of pity in exchange; for,

being universally disliked, pity seemed the natural vexation to inflict upon him, and he got plenty of it.

Raoul came to say good-bye to his friends at the Château, and found the Vicomte together with his two daughters.

“I’m sincerely rejoiced you came to-day instead of to-morrow,” said Monsieur de Vérancour.

“I go to-morrow,” interrupted Raoul.

“If you would let me finish, I meant to say that to-morrow you would have found no one here,” continued the Vicomte; “for we have to drive over to the Grandes Bruyères, and shall be away the whole day, and I would not have missed seeing you for a great deal, *mon garçon*. I shall always feel a real interest in you, for you put us all in mind of happier times,—of the times

when your mother and theirs,"—pointing to his daughters,—“were both alive. I shall be heartily glad to hear of your well-doing, and of your advancement.”

At the moment when Monsieur de Vêrancour had mentioned the journey of the next day to the Grandes Bruyères, a glance, quick as lightning, was exchanged between Raoul and Vêvette, who was seated somewhat behind her father. It was only the work of one second, for the girl lowered her eyes instantly to her work, and blushed crimson.

The leave-taking, when it came, was an affectionate one, and while the two young ladies shook hands cordially with their parting guest, the Vicomte embraced him with genuine tenderness, and specially enjoined upon him to write to them from Paris.

It is, probably, needless to inform my readers that, the next day, only Félicie accompanied her father upon the projected excursion. Vévette discovered an excuse for remaining at home, and at home she stayed, and was virtually alone in the house. Céleste, the all-pervading functionary, was at all times too glad not to be summoned from her lawful dominions in the vast subterranean kitchens of the once grand old dwelling, and from her Vévette knew she was safe. Baptiste, the "man of all work," was absent with the carriage, and had put on his old livery to look like a coachman; his wife, old Suzette, who was the most dangerous person of the lot, was weeding in the garden, and doing some work set out for her by her spouse in the artichoke beds. She was not to be got rid of, or eluded;

that Vévette well knew, for Suzette was a lynx-eyed old woman, and moreover her employment fixed her right opposite the pavilion. Nothing was left for it then but to receive Raoul inside the house. It was for the last time, and Vévette, after a great deal of discussion with herself, and with much of what she believed to be resistance, yielded.

Raoul waited behind some trees just outside the garden wall to the south,—in a spot which no one ever passed. About three o'clock Vévette came, and gave him a signal; he climbed the wall, followed the girl silently, and in a few seconds was alone with her in the usual sitting-room of the family.

Mute and mournful were the first greetings of the pair; but, in the midst of what

was the natural grief attendant on their parting, it seemed as though some other trouble lay hidden, and each marked this in the other. As Raoul held in his the hand of the shrinking girl, "Vévette," he exclaimed bitterly, "why do you shrink from me in this way? what is it you shrink from?" Vévette cast an anxious glance around her. Raoul shook his head: "It is not that!" he said impatiently. "You are not alarmed lest we should be surprised; you know that no one will come near this room for hours; that we are perfectly safe; that there are half-a-dozen ways of escaping if one heard but a mouse stir. No; that is not it. I am not deceived by the look that you send wandering out from your eyes all around us, for I see the look that lies behind it. What is it, Vévette? what is it? Sometimes it

seems to me as though there were a phantom, a dreadful something, that would always rise up between us, even when we are man and wife." And he tried to draw her close to him, but she still shrank and trembled. "Vévette!" he urged in a softer tone, pressing her hand in both his own. "I am going. We may not meet for months. It is the last time we can speak together, the very last time; I have but one hope, but one comfort in the world,—your love. Do you look upon your promise to me as a sacred one?"

A faint "Yes," escaped her lips.

"Do you count upon mine to you as absolutely as though I had solemnly pledged you my faith at the altar?"

This time the girl looked up, and looked straight and unabashed into her lover's eyes,

as she answered distinctly, "Oh ! that indeed I do."

"Then, Vévette, my own love," he rejoined, throwing his arms impetuously round her, "what can it be that you fear ? For God's sake, tell me. Do not let me go with this weight upon my heart. What is it that you dread, my wife, my surely to be wedded wife ?"

"Oh ! Raoul ! Raoul !" cried she, burying her face in her hands, "the sin ! the sin ! the fault that must not be forgiven,—the sin that will never leave us !"

He partially loosened his hold of her, and whilst one arm encircled her waist, and he sought with the other to draw her hands from her burning cheeks. "Vévette," he said, in a tone that was almost stern ; "you are wanting in respect to yourself,

wanting in respect to my wife, whom I have worshipped as a saint. What sin have you ever committed, Vévette? Your own scrupulousness is less pure than greater ignorance would be. I know where the fault lies;—in the teachings of your convent; in the gloomy, narrow, false, impious teachings of people who do not know that true love is bright, strong, and pure as steel or flame. Answer me, dear; is marriage an institution, sanctified by the Church? Is the marriage vow blessed? Is marriage a sacrament?”

“Of course it is,” murmured she, with downcast eyes.

“And you believe that when girls give themselves away in marriage to husbands who are at least totally indifferent to them, the bond is a holy one, and the wives are

blessed among women ! Do you ever ask yourself, Vévette, why some wives are faithless ? ”

“ Because they are tempted by the Evil One,” said Vévette timidly.

“ No, my sweet one,” continued Raoul, looking tenderly at her and softly stroking her hair. “ It is because they do not love their husbands, and it is dangerous to ask from the weak creatures that we are more than is humanly possible.”

“ But, Raoul,” hesitatingly whispered she, “ it is wrong ;—the Church forbids it.”

“ God does not forbid it,” answered he, gravely. “ His Word nowhere forbids it. Suppose, my own, we were married this very day, would it still be wrong that you should love me ? ”

Poor Vévette trembled, and blushed, and

looked the very picture of distress and confusion, as she attempted to reply. "Yes, dear Raoul," stammered she, "it would always be wrong. It is a sin,—a dreadful sin,—and God will punish us. It is a dreadful sin for a woman to love her husband even, as—as—I—love you!" she faintly uttered at last.

Raoul folded her gently, almost paternally, to his breast. "Poor child!" he said in a very mournful tone; "and so, it is not the circumstances of the love, not its concealment, not the momentary untruth,—no! it is the love itself which is the sin! poor little one!" And he remained silent and thoughtful for some time, with Vévette's head lying upon his shoulder and his own head resting upon her brow.

More than an hour went by, and young

Morville tried to make his future bride comprehend her duties to him and to herself, and he succeeded in so far as that she agreed to subordinate all other considerations to her passionate devotion for him ; but that the devotion itself was sinful,—that being passionate it must be so,—that remained ineradicable from poor little Vévette's creed.

“And now, Raoul,” pleaded the girl in her turn, as the moment for separation came, “what is the trouble that is hanging over you?—for there is one. You have some other care besides the mere grief, deep as it is, of leaving. May I not know it?” she added, looking up imploringly at him.

A cloud darkened Raoul's countenance, he pressed his lips together, and drew a long hard breath. “No !” was his rejoinder.

“I cannot share that trouble with you, Vévette.”

“Then you have a trouble?” she retorted, eagerly.

“Most men have; and there are many that must be borne in solitude and silence. Some burdens may be shared by those we love; but some there are that it is not good to halve, even with one’s wife.” The tone in which this was spoken left no room for further intreaty, and threw a deeper chill over the final parting of the lovers than either could have anticipated.

To the sense of utter loneliness which fell upon Vévette when Raoul was gone, there was something added which she could not define; a sort of shadow which prevented the absolute blank. “Had Raoul a secret? what was it?” that thought occupied her.

Scarcely had he left the room through the window opening on the terrace, when a knock came at the door. Vévette started, and bade the visitor enter, with a beating heart and quivering voice. It was Mère Jubine's Louison with a letter in her hand. She tendered it to Vévette with a curtsy, saying it was from Monsieur Richard Prévost. When opened it was found to contain another letter, addressed to Félicie, and a few lines by which the younger sister was humbly requested to deliver the enclosure to the elder. "It concerned," observed the writer, "an act of charity !"

"Is Monsieur Richard ill ?" asked Vévette. The girl said she did not know, but did not think he was particularly strong in this damp weather, but that she

had promised to deliver the letter. And then she went away.

Vévette in her natural simplicity and her present agitation of spirit, did perhaps think it rather odd that Monsieur Richard should send a letter to Félicie ; but what failed to strike her as strange was, that Mère Jubine's Louison should be his messenger.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### A PRUDENT YOUNG LADY.

I HAVE not yet told you how very very pretty Mademoiselle Félicie was. She was not lovely ;—her sister was that ;—neither was she handsome, or beautiful. In each of these words there was something above or something beyond Mademoiselle Félicie. But she was that supremely *jolie femme* which a Frenchwoman alone ever is. Rather under than over the middle height, the first idea she gave you was that of perfect proportion. She had not the most

beautiful throat, nor the most beautiful arm, nor hand, nor shoulder, in the world ; no one particular limb reminded you of a statue ; but the whole went together marvellously well. Each part so fitted the other, the ensemble was so harmonious, so pleasant to the eye, that you were charmed without knowing why, and would have voted to be insupportable whoever should have attempted to persuade you that you ought not to be so. All the lines were soft and rounded in Félicie's face and figure. In her whole being there was not an angle, nor anything abrupt. She was all grace, all charm. Her voice was insinuating, her movements undulating, her looks caressing. She was precisely that kind of Frenchwoman whom, if you have the most distant dream of remaining,—however little,—your own mas-

ter, you had best never meet. She never alarms and never releases you.

Her grandmother, la belle Madame de Vérancour, as old Martin Prévost had told his nephew, had been Félicie's perfect prototype ; and, Heaven knows, her domestic career had not been one to render the position of her husband an enviable one. As a young woman of sixteen before the Revolution, she had been distinguished by one exploit only, but that one was enough. She was reputed to have beaten the famous Duc de Lauzun hollow, and to have considerably helped to ruin him, whilst absolutely vanquishing his inconstancy. She went by the name of "La Provinciale qui a roué Lauzun," and after the great catastrophe, she carried her devastations into her own department, and, till past fifty, levied

contributions of all kinds upon the male population for many leagues round. Married or single, all paid tribute ; and the evil-tongued declared that all classes were admitted alike to compete for her favour. Some went even further, and hinted that the present Vicomte was the son of a Sous-Préfet of the Empire, whom she certainly had managed to preserve from dismissal under the Restoration.

La belle Madame de Vérancour was not of a religious turn of mind. She did not even grow devout with old age, but died, it was said, in an altogether unsatisfactory manner. Her portrait, painted by Madame Lebrun, in the full costume of her palmy days of Versailles, hung in the drawing-room which the two sisters had arranged at the Château ; and when Félicie happened to be alone, she

would sit intently gazing at the image, with a look that was not easily definable. Was it envy, or was it merely curiosity?

Except for the powder which disguised the wavy chestnut hair,—that thick, naturally curling, blonde cendré hair, which Félicie dressed so exquisitely,—except for that, everything was alike in the too celebrated Lady of Vêrancour and her descendant: the same calm, satin skin, with just enough of delicate colour to prevent its being pale; the same small nose, with its transparent nostrils; the same finely-arched eyebrows, and strangely fascinating light hazel eyes; the same—no! not quite the same mouth. The epoch had set its stamp there, and Lauzun's mistress had the rich full-blossomed lips that perhaps excused something out of much that they explained;

whilst our Mademoiselle de Vérancour possessed lips so thin that they were hardly more than the edges of the mouth ; bright red lines closing over twin rows of exquisitely pearl-like teeth,—with also the one little fault that they were rather pointed, rather sharp.

That was the impress of the age. Madame de Vérancour, la belle, had been lavish in every possible sense. This is not the defect of modern France. One person in D—— had even been ungallant enough, —it was the Doctor, who disliked the people of the Château because they were all so healthy that they never “consulted !” —one person had replied to a remark about Félicie’s attractions :—“ Attractive, may be ; jolie comme un ange, may be ; but that girl’s an attorney !”

Mademoiselle Félicie did certainly give those who had dealings with her a notion that she was practical; but then irregularity, let alone prodigality, is accounted such a sin, and to be wanting in order brings down such reproof upon a woman in the France of our day!

Hitherto Félicie's field of action had been a limited one, and her adversaries had been mostly female ones. Of these she had not left one unconquered; and at the convent at Poitiers she was the "pattern-girl," the example held up by all the sisters,—excepting only the unfortunate Madame Marie Claire, who took refuge with Vévette;—and she had been pronounced dogmatically by Notre Mère as certain to be an "honour to her sex," to be eminently wise and prudent and circumspect; strong against all

sentimentality, and of an equally balanced mind. Monsieur de Vérancour, whilst congratulating himself upon having such a daughter, was not altogether without a certain feeling of inferiority when in her presence, and it had been affirmed by Céleste, who came herself under Félicie's direct control, that he was afraid of her.

After Champmorin's withdrawal from the projected matrimonial engagement, the Vicomte certainly did feel slightly embarrassed, and had not yet made up his mind as to the precise terms in which he should impart to his daughter that she was not likely to be married as soon as had been supposed.

She saved him all trouble on that point.

"Dear father," she said, one evening, in the sweetest of all possible tones, and pre-

liminarily kissing him on the forehead, with the most touching grace—"Dear father; I know you have been annoyed,—pained,—about something that touches me and my establishment. I can guess what has happened; and though it is not customary for a young girl to mix herself up in such matters, still ours is an exceptional case, and I feel it incumbent upon me to share with you the burdens laid upon us by our position;—by the nobility of our name so sadly at war with the narrowness of our means."

"You always were an angel, Félicie," exclaimed her father, "but it is not fitting that——"

"I beg your pardon, father," interrupted she; "it is fitting that we should talk together over all this, for it is not fitting

that our name should go a-begging. The daughters of illustrious houses are not constrained to the same little prudish practices as those of bourgeois origin, and where the honour of the race is at stake they must lay aside prejudice, and see what is best to be done, just as, in other ages, they would, in the absence of a garrison, have had to defend the château, arms in hand. I know poor Monsieur de Champmorin has been obliged to retire."

Monsieur de Vêrancour made a movement.

"He is not to be blamed, father," resumed Félicie; "he must not be blamed; we have nothing to reproach him with, and it would be unseemly and wrong in us to bear the slightest ill-will towards him."

"I bear him no ill-will whatever," mut-

tered the Vicomte; "but those about him have talked, and will talk, and the position is a very awkward one."

"Yes, father dear, of course," rejoined Félicie, in her very blindest tones; "of course it is next to impossible to prevent people like notaries and all that class from discussing our affairs; they will talk of us; it is their chief pastime; and,—I don't deny it,—it falls naturally very heavy upon girls like us, to be made the theme of conversation of all the vulgar little bourgeois of such a miserable bit of a place as this; but that is the fault of provincial towns; there is no other occupation save that of prying into your neighbours' concerns. If we were in Paris, instead of being in D——, we should escape all, or nearly all, the immediate effects of the disaster."

Vévette looked up from her tapestry with amazement.

“In Paris?” echoed the Vicomte. “Yes, probably so, everything passes unnoticed in Paris, as in all great centres; but what earthly chance will there ever be of our being able to get to Paris?”

There was a pause of a few seconds, and then Félicie resumed, in a tone of discouragement, after musing for a few moments, “To be sure; it is that perpetual want of money!” and then there came another silence.

“Why is it,” asked Vévette, timidly, “that so much more money seems required for two people to live upon when they marry than each would find more than sufficient if they remained single? A single man can live on very little, a single woman

on less, yet, when it is a question of marrying, ten times their income appears not to be enough."

"Because, my poor child," rejoined Félicie, dogmatically, "well-born people do not marry to live, but to represent. We have to uphold our families and our names; and our duty is to take care that the children who succeed us are enabled to support their position in life with dignity. We have not yet, in spite of all Revolutions, come to such a state of things as is said to exist amongst the English, where, I believe, two individuals actually marry because they have taken some imaginary fancy for each other, and in their folly count for nothing the fortune and social standing of their children. No! we have not yet come to that."

Monsieur de Vêrancour gazed at his eldest daughter with admiration, while she propounded her theories of social economy. "All that you say is right and wise," observed he with a sigh, leaning his head upon his hand; "but unluckily it brings about one result—the levelling of everything before money. Without riches, what is to be done?"

"Yes, dear papa," answered Félicie, submissively; "you are right there, as you always are, and I can't help thinking it is wrong and unchristian-like in persons of our caste to despise money as they do"—(oh! Félicie, when do they so?)—"to look down upon riches, when riches have so often been brought to our very feet by Providence, in order that by uniting with them we should elevate the rich to our own level,

and teach them to be pious and right-thinking like us."

"Well, I can only say riches were never brought to my feet," remarked the Vicomte; "nor do I think that I can be accused of ever having scorned them."

"If I might venture, dearest father," suggested she, with her most caressing air, "though it is wandering far away from our subject, I would say that you were very hard, quite unmerciful, the other day, to poor Monsieur Richard." The Vicomte started, and, turning round, stared his daughter full in the face. "You quite abashed and hurt him when he was telling you of the great fortune he had inherited, and of what he means to make of Châteaubréville."

"No, I declare I did not," answered

stoutly Monsieur de Vérancour; "just the contrary; I told him that if he had a hundred thousand francs a year he might actually marry a lady."

"Yes," responded Félicie with the sweetest of all feline glances and accents; "but you did not tell it him—kindly."

"Humph! as to that," grunted her father, "I don't know how I told it him. I suppose I told it him just as I would have told it any other man of his sort."

"Ah! but you see, father, dear, we should be so careful of hurting the feelings of those beneath us. Men don't think of that,—women do. Poor Monsieur Richard, you see, is somewhere about the richest man in the department, besides being the most amiable and worthy young man in the world. So perfectly right-thinking. In a

year's time he will be Monsieur de Châteaubréville, with a splendid country house, and an establishment in Paris, and if,—as you advised him to do,—he should marry a well-born woman, we shall all go and visit at Châteaubréville, and we should really treat him already as a friend."

"Well, so we do!" ejaculated the Vicomte; "don't I let him dine here with us? Treat him as a friend! Yes; but I should like to see you, who theorise so finely, treating him as an equal."

"We are taught that all men are equal," said sweetly Félicie.

"But nobody believes it," retorted the Vicomte. "Why, I should like to see the rebuff he would get from you, if he ventured to ask you to become his wife. Treat him as an equal indeed!"

“In the first place, papa,” rejoined Félicie, gently, but with a shade more of firmness in her tone, “one does not make one’s equal of a man merely by marrying him; when *la grande Mademoiselle* married Lanzun, it was out of her power to make him her equal.”

“Maybe,” interrupted Monsieur de Véraucour; “but he made her pull off his boots all the same.”

“That regards her confessor, and concerns her duties of obedience; but, I repeat it, marriage binds, but does not equalise: in the next place, I would not shrink from any sacrifice that should be needed for the good of our family—of our house.”

The Vicomte sprang to his feet, and clapping his two hands upon his breast, roared at her loudly, staring at her with all

his might. "You, Félicie, you! You would marry Monsieur Richard?"

"It is Monsieur Richard who would not marry me, papa," she replied with imperturbable calmness.

"You would consent to be Madame Pré-vost," continued her father, unheeding all interruptions.

"Never, papa," answered she, in a milder tone, and with even more calmness than before; "but I would consent to be Madame de Châteaubréville with a hundred thousand francs of income, and to live half the year in Paris, where the title of Count would be easy to obtain."

"A pretty thing, indeed, for us," sneered the Vicomte. "A title given by Monsieur Bonaparte! Why, you would be ashamed to wear it."

“No, indeed, papa, I should not. Authority is authority always; and there is our own cousin, the Marquis de Vovray, who has let himself be made a Chamberlain,—the title means little enough for us,—but it means still the separation from those beneath, from the mass; that is the principal thing needed.”

Monsieur de Vérancour was silent for some moments, and rubbed his forehead anxiously. “Is it possible, Félicie,” he asked at last, “that you can be serious? Is it possible you can mean that you would marry Monsieur Richard?”

“Father,” she answered, steadily and slowly, “I tell you again there is no sacrifice I will not make to our position. I make it to you, I make it to Vévette.” The latter looked up suddenly with an air

almost of terror. "It is my duty. We are not on earth to think of ourselves, but of others. One of my first duties is to think of Vévette. Her turn must come in a year or two." Vévette felt herself grow cold and shudder inwardly. "And how is she to be provided for?"

"You are, indeed, a perfect heroine," said the Vicomte, with conviction, and as though humbled at the superior virtue of his child.

"Luckily," resumed she, giving an upward glance of thanksgiving, "I have always had my duty held up before my eyes, and, after all, duty is a thing which a well-born woman does easily." Poor Vévette felt more than ever what a wretched sinner she was. "The difficulty in all this," added Félicie, after a pause.

“would be to bring poor Monsieur Richard to understand that he might ask for my hand.” She watched her father with a very curious glance from under her eyelids whilst uttering these words. “It is a delicate and difficult negotiation. Perhaps the Abbé Leroy——”

Monsieur de Vérancour waved his hand. “I think,” interrupted he, “it would be quite possible to make Monsieur Richard understand; but, of course, I must reflect on all this. I must take time.”

“Dear father!” exclaimed the girl, “of course you must do whatever you think fit. I shall always obey.”

“Oh, Félicie!” cried Vévette, throwing her arms round her sister’s neck, when the Vicomte had retired for the night. “Can you? Can you?”

“ A well-born woman can always do what is her duty, my dear Vévette,” answered Mademoiselle Félicie, indulging in just a very little self-gratulation.

END OF VOL. I.







